Interview with Harrison M. Symmes

The Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training Foreign Affairs Oral History Project

AMBASSADOR HARRISON M. SYMMES

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Q: Harry, how did you become interested in foreign affairs?

SYMMES: I think I started out as a high school student being interested in foreign affairs, reading the weekly newspaper that all high school students got in those days.

Q: Where were you in high school?

SYMMES: I was in Wilmington, North Carolina, New Hanover High School. I remember very much reading about Palestine in those days. I was a junior in high school in 1937 and the Arab revolt was then taking place. Every week there was something about the Arabs and the Jews doing each other in and doing the British in, and so on. So I had an interest then, but that languished after I got to college. I can recall in my first class of social science I, the world history/cultural course that all freshmen had to take, the professor, Carlisle Sitterson, who later became the Chancellor of the university . . .

Q: Which university was this?

SYMMES: This was the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill. I can recall his saying one time, in the course of talking about why students were required to take that particular

subject, that it gave one some knowledge of foreign affairs which could be used in diplomacy. “Of course”, he said, “Most of you will never be interested in diplomacy because its a rich man's hobby.” [Laughter] So I think I put it out of my thoughts from then on.

But my interest developed as time went on, because the Nazis had come to power in Germany, of course, some time before that and we were all concerned at the time about whether there would be war. I went through a period of pacifism, but even a pacifist is concerned about foreign affairs for the obvious reasons. And then by the time I had become a senior—I was 20 then and this was 1942—I had decided that I was interested in seeing the kind of world that Roosevelt was talking about and that I'd learned about in the course of my studies. So I went into the Army and I went overseas—I was in North Africa and Sicily and Italy— and in 1944 I had come back to this country and had gone to OCS—infantry OCS . . .

Q: That's Officer Candidate School.

SYMMES: Officer Candidate School. As I say, I'd come back from overseas, sent back because I'd been over there for 18 months and I'd been assigned to this school before going overseas but was not released to go. So they sent me back to go to it, and very late in the war I was commissioned as a Second Lieutenant Platoon Leader in the Infantry. The war was not over.

Of course, what was happening in the Pacific was rather staggering. I can recall seeing on the bulletin board at the Officer Candidate School an announcement for Foreign Service examinations and I read it. We had to read everything on the bulletin board, of course, in the Army. It announced these examinations and said if you're successful in passing the examination, your exit from the military service will be expedited, which seemed a very good thing to happen at that time. [Laughter] In the announcement it also said that the Foreign Service Act of 1946 was in the process of being developed. This was 1945,

of course, and it hadn't been passed, but they were thinking about it. They were trying to improve upon the reforms in the Foreign Service that had been encompassed in the Rogers Act a couple of decades earlier.

Q: The Rogers Act was in 1924.

SYMMES: Yes. And in 1946 they were trying to make the Service attractive to and possible for people who did not have private means and so on. So for all of those reasons I applied. And that's how I got into the Foreign Service.

Q: How was your training when you came into the Foreign Service. How did you feel about the initial training you received?

SYMMES: Parts of it I can only say were prehistoric. The staff at the FSI at that time, it seemed to me, as it was in various periods subsequently, was composed of people who apparently didn't qualify for more important slots. We had a man there—I don't think I'll give you any names; it wouldn't serve any purpose—who had run a Foreign Service school to prep people for entry into Foreign Service and his chief interest was telling us about protocol, about dropping cards at the White House and that kind of thing, and how we should dress. Most of us in my class at the Foreign Service institute were Army veterans, Navy veterans, Marine veterans and we didn't have much time for that kind of malarkey, I can assure you. Some of us were so poor that we were still wearing parts of our old service uniforms to FSI classes. [Laughter] So we were pretty much of a trial for them and there was not much communication.

I found also that when we got to what was to be very important for me, the instruction on consular affairs, that the people who came over to talk to us spoke in such abstruse terms for us who knew nothing about visas and passports and citizenship, that in many cases we couldn't understand it. It became a very recondite subject for us. As a result, I think I came very close to flunking the test they gave us on visas and passports. [Laughter]

Q: [Laughter] I think you'll enjoy that I came some years later and had the same problem.

SYMMES: But there was a lot of unreality about it. They were making a transition between a Foreign Service that had existed before the Second World War and a Foreign Service that had been encompassed in the Foreign Service Act of 1946. And they had these new people who came in with the idea that a new kind of Foreign Service was possible and we didn't have any time for these outmoded . . .

Q: Describe a little more about how you felt about your class, not only your class but ones of that period. I mean, coming out of the war.

SYMMES: Well, I think that by and large we had some of the best people that have entered the Foreign Service in those classes of '47 and '48, principally because they were people who had come through the Depression and the great social and political turmoil and new ideas that were going on at that time. They were people who had been in the war and who had had a greater or lesser degree of physical trial and danger there, and who had gotten their feet on the ground. People who were by and large somewhat older than later entrants and people who were very much devoted to the old puritan work ethic, for want of a better description, that had characterized our society for a long time. I found that the degree of personal integrity among my colleagues was extremely high. I never had the same feeling later about the commonality of Foreign Service officers—younger Foreign Service officers—I dealt with. And I don't think that was because I'm an old fogy.

I'm thinking of people like the recently retired Director General George Vest, who was one of my classmates. I wrote to George when he was retiring to tell him how much I had admired his personal integrity throughout his service. People like George strengthened their colleagues, because we felt there were people like him — and there were also others in my class — who just weren't going to take advantage of their colleagues by some sort of hypocrisy or whatever to get a job in their place.

If there was a principle involved, these people were going to stand up for it. And by that I don't mean just going around making a nuisance of themselves with some senior officer or people from another agency, but doing it in a diplomatic way, but still willing to stand up for the principle ultimately. And if the test came, turning down a job or just saying, “I'm not the person to write that particular paper because I just don't happen to believe in it.” Those were the kinds of people that I saw in my class. Except for two or three out of about 40, I was never disappointed in any of them. Many of them have remained close friends and still are today.

Q: One does talk about the crucible of war. Really the war and the Depression did something particular to a generation that just was a unique experience.

Your first assignment—we're talking about 1947—was to Alexandria. You did later become, of course, what is termed an Arabist—if this is a good word or not. Was this happenstance that you were directed toward this part of the world?

SYMMES: No, not at all. That was really when my career achieved some direction. I go back to that high school experience reading about the Arab revolt in Palestine. Then when I went overseas, my first landing was in Morocco. So I had the experience of becoming acquainted with the Moroccans and some aspects of that culture—not very much, because soldiers just didn't get into it. Subsequently, I was in Tunisia and very briefly in Algeria. I became fascinated with the Arabic language and with the culture.

In my undergraduate work I had done a great deal in philosophy of religion and I'd become interested and curious about Islam and Islamic culture. I started reading Lawrence during the war.

Q: Seven Pillars of Wisdom and . . .

SYMMES: T. E. Lawrence.

Q: T. E. Lawrence.

SYMMES: Revolt in the Desert and subsequently Seven Pillars of Wisdom. And being a soldier and then later on an infantry platoon leader, I found a fascination for his tactics as a soldier. Very, very compelling. There was something about the whole ambiance of North Africa and the Arab and Islamic culture that grabbed hold of me. I have to confess that at that stage it was rather romantic. I mean, it was rather a fascination for Lawrence—whose warts I began to see as time went on. Today I have a completely different view of Lawrence than I had then.I'd picked up a few words of Arabic in Morocco. I could say barak allahu fik for “thank you” and so on, and a few other expressions that the Moroccans mispronounce as I found out in classical Arabic later. We were, as part of the FSI Basic Course, given talks by various area specialists, European, Near Eastern, South Asian, Russian. We had George Kennan talk to us, which was a great thrill for all of us. The idea was to give us some idea of how the Foreign Service was constituted and what it did, but also to recruit people to go into some of these areas.

The person who talked to us—I can't remember now who it was, I can see his face and I think his name was Sweeney - - the person who talked to us from the Near East did a very good job on me. So when the time came to put down a preference for an assignment, I decided that I would put down in that order—Damascus, Beirut, Alexandria. And it turned out that I got Alexandria.

Q: Could you describe Alexandria when you went there in '47?

SYMMES: Alexandria was absolutely fantastic at that time. You can pick up books like the Four Quartets of Lawrence Durrell.

Q: The Alexandria Quartet.

SYMMES: The Alexandria Quartets, to get some flavor of it. That was one aspect of it. Most of the kinds of settings that Durrell depicts were missed by my wife and me.

[Laughter] Simply because we were sort of provincial and newly married and a lot of it was over our heads. We were just too innocent and naive.

But at that stage there was more royalty packed into Alexandria than there was left over in all the rest of the world. That may be an exaggeration, because there was still the Scandinavian royalty and the Dutch and Belgians and so on. But in Alexandria we had the Italian royal family, we had the Albanians, we had the leftovers of the Hohenzollerns such as the Princes of Hesse and that kind of thing. All kinds of odds and ends of people, Bulgarians, etc.

And these people, of course, had been there all during the war. They had plenty of money to spend, they had plenty to spend it on. Immediately after the war, the French were sending out all their best wines and everybody else was sending all of their best things of whatever nature, dresses, whatever, down to Alexandria. It was the jumping capital of what we later called an international caf# society.

Sometimes we would go to about three or four cocktail parties a night. I'd never had caviar before and we'd have three or four different kinds of caviar and all kinds of marvelous dishes, at just the average cocktail party. There would be all kinds of guests — the Calvis, the Countesses of Calvi were granddaughters or grandnieces of Victor Emmanuel. We were there for Victor Emmanuel's funeral. And it was just unreal to see the royalty marching in it.

Q: You were a vice consul?

SYMMES: I was vice consul. I was the junior officer on the totem pole in the consulate general. We had a consul general, we had a senior career vice consul, and we had a junior career vice consul and that was I. And we had a staff vice consul who was a commercial officer. And that was the size of the officer staff.

Q: What was your main task?

SYMMES: I was to do all the leftover dirty work, principally because I was so new. And this meant interviewing all of the stacks and stacks of people who were on the oversubscribed immigration quotas when they came in and reviewing those files.

Q: These were for immigrant visas.

SYMMES: Immigrant visas. Of course, at that time it was terribly strict. You'd have quotas that would have only a hundred people a year that were oversubscribed for the next 50 to 60 years.

Q: Which remained. I remember talking to people who said that on the Indian quota you still have 125 years to go. [Laughter]

SYMMES: [Laughter] Well, that kind of thing. And, of course, we had people who had been—there were many British and other people of Western origin—born in Egypt and, of course, would be on the Egyptian quota. We had all the Armenians and other expatriates who had happened to be born in Egypt or Turkey or Greece, and those quotas were very oversubscribed.

Q: So in many ways, what you were really doing was holding peoples' hands.

SYMMES: Exactly. Or trying to help them find a way to achieve non-quota status or some sort of preference status.

The other thing I did was shipping and seamen. I did, of course, citizenship. There were a lot of citizenship cases, people who had expatriated themselves in various ways.

And then what was the most interesting thing of all, I was judge of the consular court. We still had the capitulations or certain remnants of the old consular capitulations. And the capitulations—I need to describe that.

Q: Why don't you describe it a little.

SYMMES: During the Turkish empire, the various western countries interested in that part of the world, principally the French and the British, had persuaded the Turkish empire to —there were certain headings or capitulations in various kinds of treaties—allow them because of the difference in law, the difference in the cultures, the Islamic and Christian culture, the Roman law and Islamic law, the Anglo-Saxon common law and Islamic law, to judge their own subjects in their little footholds in the Ottoman empire. Not just in Turkey but all around the area that the empire controlled. At that earlier time, the Westerners had both criminal and civil jurisdiction. This was good because it saved any embarrassment of too rigorous a punishment or what might seem to the Westerners an undue, unjust punishment. That situation persisted until well into this century when the capitulations were modified and, of course, much of the Turkish empire was broken up and most of the criminal jurisdiction was taken away.

Now in Egypt they set up what were called mixed courts - that is, mixed local and foreign judges. And most of the judges were Westerners, French, British or whatever, Dutch, and so on. And they continued to have some criminal jurisdiction for certain cases but it was primarily a civil jurisdiction. But the consulates retained what is called personal status jurisdiction, things like marriages, divorces and inheritances, which the mixed courts and the local courts couldn't apply because they just didn't have any people that knew anything about it.

The consul general was utterly bored by this and the senior vice consul didn't have any interest in it, so the consul general said to me, “You're the judge of the consular court.” [Laughter] So I got out the Martindale-Hubbel law directory and other little helps and went to see the American judges on the mixed courts. There was a very famous judge, Jasper Brinton, and another American judge, Robert Henry. They were, particularly Henry, very, very kind to me and would help me out. Most of the cases were just doing purely mechanical things in the administration of estates and seeing that the executors did

their jobs and inventories were made and that kind of thing. So that was rather fascinating and sort of took me back to a more remote time. [Laughter] Those are the kinds of things I did.

Q: Did you have any political reporting in there?

SYMMES: We had very little political reporting of any kind. Such political reporting as was done, was done by the consul general and by the senior vice consul.

Q: Did you have any feel for the Foreign Service? Looking back on it now, how did you feel about the consul general's staff?

SYMMES: When I—I should have told you this earlier- -went into the Foreign Service, I resigned a fellowship at the University of North Carolina, a doctoral fellowship. I resigned that fellowship to go into the Foreign Service when I got the offer because my wife and I couldn't find a place to live in Chapel Hill. I really wanted to stay in the academic world, and this was a fellowship in philosophy. I'd been told I could study philosophy of history and philosophy of religion, which were my principal interests at the time. But we couldn't find a place to live, so I went into the Foreign Service. When my wife and I made this decision, we said to ourselves, “If we don't like it, we can always go back to the academic world.” And, in fact, the University had told me that I could probably get the fellowship back when I wanted it.

So in Alexandria, despite all this fascination I told you about—which in a way was not my cup of tea, I didn't like it, let's put it that way—I thought it was wrong to see the abyss between the Egyptian fellahin and the slum dwellers of Alexandria and Cairo and these people who . . .

Q: The Egyptian fellahin would be the peasants.

SYMMES: The peasants. Who were among the most low-lived people. Perhaps only in the Indian subcontinent were people worse off. This really disturbed me greatly.

But beyond that, I was disturbed by the consul general who was, it turned out, an alcoholic. He was also a homosexual and a throwback to an earlier Foreign Service. He was from a very wealthy Yankee family, as I would say as a southerner. He did not like southerners and, obviously, I was one. He and I didn't get on at all. And I didn't get on too well with the senior vice consul because he considered himself senior, a little bit older than I was. Thus, I felt in that unreal atmosphere and the fact that I was given these rather mundane, to me mundane jobs — Let me say I think there's nothing so important as consular work, but it was not my cup of tea. It wasn't what I wanted to do with my life. And much of it was terribly frustrating because it didn't go anywhere, it was just reviewing files.

So I was considering leaving the Foreign Service by the end of my 18 months in Alexandria. My wife and I thought it was just too rich for us. We deplored the lifestyle.

Q: You represented really a new generation. You were right on the leading edge of a new generation. The old Foreign Service, which was often the way it is sometimes portrayed—people still think it is today—but actually there was an old Foreign Service prior to World War II and a newer one.

SYMMES: Cookie pushers.

Q: Cookie pushers. An old Foreign Service, very social, and a new one really, consisting of people coming from different backgrounds and usually with military experience.

SYMMES: Right. Well, the other thing was, I found that there was no way to get to know the local people in that atmosphere. First of all, we were so taken up, we had to go to all kinds of things to which we were invited. We had met two young Egyptian engineers on our way out to Alexandria. The consul general found out we were seeing something of them, and he said, “They aren't really the people you are supposed to be in touch with.”

That kind of thing. So I was ready to get out of the Foreign Service when word came that I'd been assigned to Damascus as political officer. I later found out that people back in Washington and in Cairo—I can't name any of these people but people who knew what I was going through with the kind of boss I had and in that situation—recognized in me some qualities that weren't being used and said, “Before this guy gets kicked out on probation, let's give him a chance to do something.” So I was rewarded for my 18 months in Alexandria by being sent to Damascus as political officer.

Q: Could you describe the situation as you saw it and what we were doing in Damascus? You were there from 1949 to 1952.

SYMMES: Damascus was then one of the few remaining legations. We had a minister there, James Hugh Keeley, a wonderful man who had been there earlier on in the '20s and who had become, by reason of his service in that part of the world, very, very pro-Arab and very ardently interested in seeing what he would call justice done in the Palestine situation, which by then had become a key factor in Middle Eastern policy.

Q: Israel had been established in 1948.

SYMMES: Israel had declared its independence in May of '48 and, of course, Palestine had been partitioned in November of '47.

Q: The first war . . .

SYMMES: The first Arab-Israeli war had taken place in '48.

Q: So Israel was a fact, and you were in Syria.

SYMMES: And we had armistice agreements which had been made in '49 and there was a mixed armistice commission between Lebanon and Israel, between Syria and Israel, and

between Jordan and Israel. I've forgotten now whether there was one between Egypt or not, but I don't think there was.

So when I got to Damascus, one of the principal issues was the continuing border unrest between Syria and Israel. At that time, Syria, as it was later, was by far the more activist of the Arab states and the situations were just boiling over constantly between Syria and Israel.

At the same time—I got to Syria just as there was a coup d' #tat—a colonel named Husni Al-Za'im had overthrown a civilian government, some old fogies who had come out of the Arab Nationalist movement — I'd been in Damascus about six weeks or so when Za'im was overthrown. [Laughter] Then we had a succession of coups d'etat. Every few months there would be either a violent, more or less violent, or not so violent coup d' #tat behind the scenes.

There was a great ferment between more strongly nationalist people who wanted to take a harder line toward Israel, and that was certainly part of a very complicated political situation, but there was in addition to that a great ferment about what the middle class, what the sort of mass of people in Syrian society were going to get out of being an independent country. They were tired of the sort of old landholder, wealthy leftover Turkish empire people and mandate people who had been buttressed by the French when they controlled Syria up until the Second World War. They had learned a great deal, many of them from American University Beirut, but also from the more widespread Arab nationalist movement which went back to a number of Egyptians like Jamal Al- Din Al-Afghani and so on, who had a notion of using the Arab culture as a means of developing a nation in that area.

So these people, many of them educated in France and some educated at AUB, the American University Beirut, wanted economic and social changes. Later on some of them began to flirt with forms of socialism, even with the communists. But this was greatly

exaggerated by us principally and by Westerners, who, any time they couldn't understand something in those days or didn't like the way it was going, would label it as a communist movement. There was very little communism in the Arab world ever.

So there we were with these people fighting their governments, and changing their governments as I say, either violently or behind the scene in some way because of the attitudes of those governments toward Israel, because of the attitudes of those governments toward what they called the imperialists, the French and the British. And of course the French and the British were still actively trying to retain their colonialist positions in that part of the world. So it made a very complicated political situation extremely interesting to me.

Q: You were sort of parachuted into a very volatile position in Syria at the time of all this ferment. As a political officer, how did you operate? What did you do? How did you keep in touch?

SYMMES: Obviously I'd never been a political officer before, and there is no textbook on how to be one. At least there wasn't in those days. FSI didn't tell us a great deal about it. One could read typical political reports on a desk before going overseas. You spent a week or so on the desk reviewing what was coming in and saw what a political officer did. And one could talk to and look up political officers in places he visited, such as Cairo. But much of it was by guess and by God as to what you were supposed to do. Now we'd get certain kinds of directives about what the Department and the other agencies of the government were interested in, what they wanted to know, what our foreign policy interests were.

By the time I got there, they were revising the Foreign Service manual. It had been called the Foreign Service Regulations, and it had a section on what our political interests were in a broad way and how we went about doing the job. But a lot of it I had to learn on the job. Much of it was getting out to talk to people. Now, one advantage that I had in Damascus

in those days was that I had French even though I didn't have Arabic, I was only just learning Arabic, got started taking classes in Egypt and then I continued these classes in Damascus, ultimately under an FSI arrangement. I didn't have much Arabic, but I did have French. And, of course, most of the educated people in Syria spoke French. And a lot of the . . .

Q: It had a lot of the French colony.

SYMMES: Yes. A lot of the French mandate. And a lot of the ordinary people spoke French. So I was able to get in touch with people, the politicians and so on, and I was a real beaver. I would go around and see people Americans had never talked to before.

Q: Try to pass on a feel for the technique of this. What would you do? In other words, you'd be sitting at your desk and say, "All right, what do I do today?"

SYMMES: Well, one of the most important things to do was to talk to the locals who worked in the embassy. We had a terribly good translator/interpreter who came from an upper- class Damascus family, an old family, who worked for the legation and who took a shine to me. And I liked him very much. I would go to him, and there were other old-line local employees and I would talk to them and ask them all kinds of biographical information, who fits into where and who plugs in where and so on. I was doing a lot of what we called in those days, confidential biographic reports on people. And I found that a very good way of knowing how things worked.

We would go out and go into caf#s and drink coffee and play tric-trac (or backgammon) or chess and meet people that way. I called on, of course, all of the government officials who would give me an appointment and got to know them, principally the political ones since I wasn't the economic officer. There were scads of newspapers and so I would call on the newspaper editors, most of whom also were calling on us, and particularly political officers because they always conceived of a political officer primarily as an intelligence officer, because that's what the French and British officials were in their view. And they

were always out to get a subsidy for their newspaper to get the right kinds of editorials printed about America or whatever.

So that was the kind of thing I did. And, of course, I read every local newspaper I could get my hands on. We had a good translation service. I read as much background information as I could so that when I talked to these people I'd know something about the ways the various Christian sects broke down and related to each other. And the same thing with the Islamic sects. Thus, I was giving myself an area studies course. I was really doing graduate work in Near Eastern research as much as anything else. I found it an exciting period.

Q: What were American interests there? Did you say you were receiving direction on your reporting from a consul general who was dedicated to the Arab cause?

SYMMES: A minister. Yes.

Q: How did this work?

SYMMES: Well, he, of course, generally reviewed anything that went out. He was a fair-minded man and even if he disagreed he would allow things to go out even though he would say, “Don't you think . . .”

Q: Who are you mentioning?

SYMMES: James Hugh Keeley. I disagreed with him rather basically. He was terribly partisan and I thought he tended to lack objectivity and he knew I felt that way. Later on we had a Deputy Chief of Mission who in some ways was even more subjective in his views than Keeley was. I would have very strong disagreements with this person and, in fact, on two or three occasions availed myself of the Foreign Service Manual regulations on political reporting to say, “I disagree with your recommended changes in my dispatch and

I want it to go in as I wrote it. I certainly recognize the right of you . . .," the deputy chief of mission or the minister or later the ambassador, " . . .to dissent from it."

Q: What were the issues usually?

SYMMES: Generally the issues that I found I disagreed with people about were the manner in which they reported the clashes between the Israelis and the Syrians on the border. As I say, there was a mixed armistice commission. And the mixed armistice commission was made up of military officers and some civilians from the Western countries. We had, generally, American Marine officers serving on this commission and many of them would have what I call a sort of a military blinder view of what was taking place, without appreciating the political ramifications. And they would come up to the legation, later the embassy, and would tell anybody who would listen, off the record, what was going on and how the Israelis had done something bad. You know, it was generally the Israelis that had done something bad; it was never the Syrians. This, of course, was from people who were stationed on the Syrian side of the border, and the military people on the Israeli side were generally giving just as much a bigoted view on the other side. And I found out that in some cases a degree of anti-Semitism, blatant anti-Semitism, was coming out, which galled me very much because I've never had a drop of that in my views and blood and so on. I did not want to lend myself to a report on how bad the Israelis had been when I had no way of checking the accuracy of it. I mean, after all, these were human beings that were seeing these particular infractions and so on. And to take one person's view of who had started shooting or where the incident had taken place, it seemed to me was inaccurate and false reporting. And so I just refused to lend myself to that and I would generally say this to the DCM, the deputy chief of mission. He would have gotten an earful from one of these officers and would say, "Here it is and I've written out notes. Prepare a report on it."

I'd say, "I'm sorry, but I don't think I can do that. It seems to me this is bias. We don't have both sides."

“Well, you don't have to have both sides. Just report it as what was given to us.”

And I'd say, “Well, I don't want to lend myself to that.”

So there was this kind of thing, generally, that I had difficulty with.

Now once in a while, because I developed sooner or later a very broad contact with the political factions, I would come up with a report that was not consistent with views that the Department had previously held about what was going on and what these particular parties were up to. And I can recall one instance when I worked on a report for months and I really had terribly good sources. It was a rather lengthy report. I sent it in to the DCM to be reviewed and he sent it back with a note on it saying, “What is Lewis Jones going to think when he reads this?” Lewis Jones was then the Director of Near East Affairs.And in my brash—I was very brash in those days—way sent back a note saying, “I don't care!” [Laughter] I did.

Q: What was the departmental attitude that you felt you should be supporting or not supporting on the situation appropriate to Syria?

SYMMES: At that time in the larger setting, we were attempting to bolster primarily the moribund British position. In many ways it was a terribly mistaken policy because the British position was in many ways lost. It was also terribly unrealistic. The British did not have the power to carry out the so-called position or what was left of it. And we and they were developing things like the Middle Eastern Defense Organization by 1950. We were developing concepts by which we would bring together, hopefully, the countries in the Near East- -and I say Near East rather than Middle East because it was this collection right around the Eastern Mediterranean—as a strategic defense against a presumed Soviet push into that region, principally into the Persian Gulf but also into the eastern Mediterranean. Obviously, this policy was designed to safeguard oil supply and, of course, British and American interests, and French interests in the oil fields of that area. Now, the

interest in preserving that strategic position led us to support generally what was left of the British position and to a certain extent, the French position, although there was a great deal of in-fighting and suspicion and rivalry among the three countries. The French being low on the totem pole, but still having ways of causing and fomenting trouble.

So the Department's view was that we should, wherever possible, cooperate with the British, which we did. We exchanged a great deal of intelligence and general political information. I was always in touch with my British political officer colleagues.

Q: The British carryover from the wartime alliance.

SYMMES: That's exactly right. And yet at the same time, to me it seemed we were neglecting what was apparent. That to the extent we supported these vestiges of imperialism and colonialism — and they were more than that in some cases, they were very strong vestiges at least — to that degree we were incurring the same odium and were becoming in place of the British and the French the whipping boy for the nationalists in the region.

In any case, what we were trying to do in general was to preserve that Western position in the Middle East . . .

Q: A question has been asked by a rather distinguished professor of American diplomatic history—not a question but a thesis—that said, "Challenge some of the assumptions that we had at the time." You've already alluded to them, but maybe talk a little more. Did we see a Soviet threat, or was it a communist threat there? Was this true? Was this overriding much of our reporting, our view, and do you feel it was justified?

SYMMES: I think it was extremely exaggerated. I thought so at the time. I tried to leaven my own reporting where possible to play it down. Not to undermine our policy or anything like that but because I just didn't think it was right.

In my view—and to a certain extent I'm looking back now and perhaps looking more wisely at the situation than I did at the time—I think at the time I can say this is correct, it seemed to me that whatever communist potential or Soviet potential there was in that part of the world that I was familiar with and with what I read about the rest of it, even extending to Iran, grew out of the unhappiness of those people with the leftover colonial situation. And they were so unhappy with that leftover imperialist and colonialist, social and economic situation and their lack of true political independence because of that, that they would turn, as some of the Arabs would say, we would “make an alliance with the devil,” if it would save us from this particular situation.

Thus, it seemed to me that to the extent that the Soviets and the communists in general could make any in-roads in that area that they would do so out of the frustration of the people who saw no other way to get out of what you might call their bondage. Their political, economical social bondage. And this was true of such groups in Syria at the time, as the Islamic socialists. Islam just couldn't countenance in any way, there's never been anybody who knew anything about Islam who thought it could countenance any kind of association with communism, with Marxism—it's just oil and water. And the Islamic socialists on the other hand at one point were playing footsie with the communists simply as a way to manipulate them, not because they had any kind of sympathy for them. The same thing happened with what was called the Arab Resurrection Party, we later called it the Baath, which took over in Syria and Iraq later on, and still runs both countries in a way. The Baath ideology was based on French socialist ideas. Those people had no interest whatsoever in communism and in fact were suspicious of it. There were other kinds of little fragmentary socialist parties, secular in orientation which had nothing to do with communism. But on the other hand, if they felt they could ring our bell by saying something good about the communists or about the Soviets because of our policy on Israel or because of our support of the British and French economic positions or the remnants in those countries, they would do so. [Laughter] We couldn't understand this and

it just became easy as it was at the time and particularly in the era of McCarthyism to say “Oh, the Soviet menace is awful. We've got to do everything we can to stop them.”

Q: I don't want to overplay this, saying that our foreign policy apparatus came from an earlier era of one where we looked upon the colonial powers as being a stabilizing power and we were used to playing a sort of poor country cousin to the British and the French. There were areas where we didn't want to get too involved, and so we would tend to view nationalism with suspicion because it was a challenge to the old way of things. And very soon particularly intense nationalism, which is somewhat unpredictable, became associated with communism. Do you think there was that in there?

SYMMES: I certainly do. Because after all we Americans had poked at British and French imperialism, in what I would call the inter-war period, in such a way that the British and French just despised any sort of free-thinking American political writer or academician who went after imperialism and tried to promote democracy and so on. The necessities of the wartime alliance forced us to play that down so that if you look at what was taking place in the academic world and to a certain degree in our foreign policy pronouncements between the two wars, we were being far more critical before the Second World War than we were after it because of the obligations of the alliance.

Q: Yes. That was the difference between having responsibility and not having responsibility.

SYMMES: That's right. But there was also something else, and that is that I think we had not previously gone far enough in our own thinking and we had no vision of what kind of world we thought we wanted for ourselves from the standpoint of our new national interest and what kind of world would be best for the world itself. Since we hadn't thought that through, I think we carried out, or became mired in, what I consider one of our worst what you might call foreign policy cultural mistakes. And by that I mean foreign policy procedural attitudes. And that is, that as a country, as a foreign policy establishment, we simply do

not know how to, and are unwilling to, cut our losses when we are faced with a bad policy. Instead of finding a way to develop a rationale to change that policy quietly and behind the scenes and let it evolve, instead of doing that, we just pour good money after bad. I've seen this in any number of foreign policy situations that I have been personally very much involved in. And I've made recommendations on occasion—we can talk about some of those if you want to later—in which I think if we had carried out those recommendations, we would have substantially improved the situation in the Middle East. It's simply because we seem unwilling to face the fire of being caught at having changed our policy. Part of that is not having, as I say, a view of what we really want, but part of it is just built into us. It's easier to go on the same old way than it is to face up to it, to take the responsibility for developing a public relations rationale such as: “Oh, no. We haven't changed our policy; we're just not interfering. We're letting nature take its course.” [Laughter]

Q: How much did McCarthyism—we're talking about the late '40s, early '50s—play in the atmosphere in your reporting?

SYMMES: Well, in my own case, very little. First of all, I was too brash. [Laughter] And too independent to let it. I've always been extremely liberal in my own political thinking and I was really angry about McCarthy. And although I wouldn't do anything just to wave a flag or something like that, it never influenced my reporting at all and there really wasn't much opportunity for it to do so. I perhaps was lucky in that when I did say something about local communism or Marxism or something like that, I did it in an objective way so that I put it in a context of the pros/cons, rights/wrongs and that kind of thing. So it didn't really enter into it. But in terms of how I felt at the time and how I think some of my colleagues felt, it was extremely unpleasant. We were ashamed of it in terms of how it made us look to the rest of the world, to the British and French and our local contacts and colleagues. What was always so strange to me was that a lot of this McCarthyism and security investigation, Scott McLeod, and purifying the State Department and so on, was after homosexuals, and yet I had a homosexual boss in my first post who was flagrant and had a young man living with him and so on. Later on there was an ambassador in a Near Eastern country in 1954

even who was a known homosexual and there were other people whom I knew. Despite all this business about being a security risk and so on, these people were never touched. And it just seemed to me somewhat unreal that we were making all this noise and not doing anything about it.

Q: It was really more a political than a moral matter in the way things actually were carried out.

SYMMES: Well, it wasn't so much—and I want to make clear that I'm not making a moral judgment myself—what I'm saying is that the general attitude at the time was that these people, because of their lifestyles and because they hadn't really come out of the closet in those days, were extremely insecure because of the possibility of blackmail, because they were still in the closet and so on. From the security standpoint, other people were taking lie detector tests all over the place. I mean, it wasn't just whether or not you were a homosexual, but in those days if you were philandering and having an affair with somebody not your wife, you were in bad trouble, theoretically, because you were susceptible to blackmail and therefore were a security risk. I found that at the time amazing. In fact today I can still give you no effective explanation for it.

Q: You went to Arabic training in 1952. Now you've been in the Arab world for two posts and you were then going in with Arabists and training, and could you talk a little about the culture of the Arabists? Because the Arabists in the State Department have had both a good name and a bad name, because, one, they're too aligned to the Arab world and there is always the implied idea that somehow or another they're anti-Semitic because their view towards Israel and all? Also could you talk a little about how you felt about Israel and the Arab world and all.

SYMMES: I think that much of the what you might call the public view of the Arabists was deserved. I think that you can trace it to a number of things. First of all, many of our language programs were not well conceived at the time. They were taken over in some

cases by linguists, academicians, who had a particular kind of ax to grind and this was certainly true in the Arab situation. And these people who might be terribly good linguists or area specialists, historians, that kind of thing, sometimes had no political sensitivity or practical ideas about what was needed by a Foreign Service Officer who was going to use Arabic and area expertise. Thus, I would say our programs were somewhat faulted.

Beyond that, to the Service itself — by the kind of premium it placed on being a European specialist and being involved in what you might call the larger world interests — getting involved in the Arab world was less important. It was sort of on the back burner in many ways. And this meant that we did not always attract the highest qualified officers. When I say that, I mean people who were good professionally in what we call political work or economic work or political military work and also we didn't appreciate how important it was to have Arabists in the consular establishment. I, as a vice consul in my first post, had learned you are at the mercy of a person translating if you're making a determination about citizenship or about the motives of a visa applicant. If you don't have a very good translator or interpreter or if you don't speak the language yourself, you won't know sometimes what's really being said. So I found that at least in Arabic we didn't have a good notion of what we wanted for the Arabists and sometimes Personnel gave us people who thought, “Well, I've got to find some way to get ahead and get into political work. Therefore, since I can't get into Soviet language and area and I can't get into Japanese or something else, I'll take Arabic.” And thus we got sort of a hodge podge of people. There were at the time I went in no really adequate language aptitude tests and for the most part no tests were given to people. Training slots were just filled, typically.

As you can see, I wear two hearing aids today. My hearing, according to the audiologists, hasn't changed since my ears were injured in the war. [Laughter] And I can tell you audiologists say, “How in the world did you ever learn Arabic? Either you had a very high aptitude or something, or you had to get people to repeat an awful lot.” Because the nature

of the language is such that the discriminations between consonants become terribly important. Well, I'm making too much of this.

The selection of people was poor and it continued so. After I had become an Arabist, passed the test and so on to get the label and had used the language fluently, back in the States in the late '50s and the '60s I was on the Language and Area Subcommittee of the Foreign Service Association. We worked with people at FSI and in Personnel to try to get first of all better training, more realistic training, to get a different approach toward the linguistic needs, what kind of Arabic was needed, that is whether it's spoken colloquial, classical, something called modern standard or whatever. And what kind of area training, what kinds of people you wanted in it, what their capabilities ought to be, how they would be assigned, how many language positions there would be. Through that experience I found that the program produced some excellent people. I can name you some. Talcott Seelye, Richard Parker, Richard Murphy, and there are others, but those stand out. It produced some people who at the end of two years were about as good in Arabic as my wife was in kitchen Arabic. [Laughter] And who had no real understanding or feel for the area's history, its ways of doing things and so on. I can recall a colleague who went through a year of training and who ended up in a post in the Arab world. Bill Stoltzfus who was another good Arabist, passed through that place and later came down to Kuwait where I then was, and said, “Do you know, Mr. X is the most fluent person in Arabic I've ever heard on 90 words.” That was the kind of thing we were doing in the Arabic training program.

So in many ways it was a failure and some of the people who were in it, I think, had a degree of anti-Semitism. They just couldn't put in balance the—how should I put it—the feelings, the needs, the pressures that were on the Israelis and on the American Jews and the pressures that were on the Arabs. They saw the world in blacks and whites. There were no grays. I found throughout my career when I was working on anything having to do with the Near East that I had to be very careful about some of my colleagues. First of all by what I said because they would say I was pro-Israeli, but also about their reporting,

how they got their facts, how they made their conclusions and so on. Some of them simply could not separate out the political truths that were important to us from the standpoint of our national interests from their own personal points of view and biases.

Q: Was there anything in the training or endemic to the position, and the fact that you're in the Arab world, that made you more partisan, do you think? Or was it more that their minds were set before they went in?

SYMMES: I think there was nothing significant in training to cause it. There was one man who was on the faculty at FSI, and I won't name his name, who was so terribly partisan that he was something of a joke to any person who had objectivity. Now there were others who would cite him as a great authority but they were people who, as I would put it, shared his anti-Semitic streak anyway. [Laughter] But by and large in the training, certainly in the language itself, there was little opportunity for any bias to creep in.

In the area training, as I say, there was at least one and maybe some other people who would come over and talk and give a biased view. But it stuck out if one were objective and I don't think it mattered very much.

Q: Talking about bias, I think one has to separate a certain amount. There is a tendency to try to lump anti-Israeli and anti-Semitism and this does not necessarily have to hold true.

SYMMES: Absolutely. I couldn't agree more.

Q: I mean, one view is that people think the worst of Jews. The other one, that Israel is the creation and the maintenance of Israel is not necessarily in the best interests of the United States from a geopolitical point of view.

SYMMES: Right.

Q: How much was this a factor, do you think? Which was which looking at this now?

SYMMES: Let me go back before I answer that question to another. You talked about whether there were local factors in Service overseas that caused us to feel a certain way. There's always a degree of localitis and you have to be extremely careful that you avoid it.

Q: Localitis is over-identifying with the place where you are stationed.

SYMMES: That's right. And becoming known as their partisan and advocate and so on. So you always have to be careful about that. Also, you would find in many places Americans who had long been established — missionaries, businessmen, Americans working as professionals in U.N. organizations and so on — who would have hobby-horses and who would get a degree of localitis that was obvious but not always distinguishable. So there were those kinds of local factors.

But to go back to what you were talking about in—let me see if I could put it correctly—maybe you'd better re . . .

Q: How much was anti-Semitism or anti-Israel as Israel as a national state?

SYMMES: Well, let me put it this way. Sometimes we would develop foreign policy mechanisms and so on that were set up to achieve certain kinds of ends which would then become ends in themselves. Now I'm thinking of the American Friends of the Middle East in this connection. American Friends of the Middle East had been set up to—and I'm a little bit classified here—but it had been set up by our government to sort of serve as a mechanism for keeping communists out and to allow us to set up local contacts that were extra-governmental. And we put some money into it. This later came out in congressional investigations, and so I'm not saying anything not already on the record.

The people who became involved in the American Friends of the Middle East at one stage were sometimes—and I would say this, I'm making a judgment—were sometimes anti-Jewish, were anti-Semitic and were not just making a judgment that the state of Israel is not in our best interests. You see, you run into another thing there. Let's say if we could

play God and on November 29, 1947, we would have made the right decision, we would not have partitioned Palestine in the way it was done to create a state of Israel or a state of Judah or anything else. We would have found some way to keep that place together. We didn't do that. In fact, by May 15, 1948, a state of Israel was created. So then you are faced with a political reality. There is something there called the State of Israel. It's been recognized, and however it was recognized, whether it was by duplicity, undue pressure, or whatever, it was done. So you have a reality that you have to deal with.

I have known a number of American Jews, personal friends and contacts who have said to me over the years, “I'm so sorry the State of Israel was created, but it does exist and now we have to support it.” I personally was opposed to the creation of the State of Israel, but once it was done, it was a fact of life and there it was. The undoing of it—unless you have some plan that I've never been aware of, I've never seen anybody come up with a way we could undo the State of Israel—was impossible. And therefore we had to live with it.

So when I make a judgment about whether somebody was anti-Semitic or not, I'm merely coming up with a statement that a kind of lack of objectivity about foreign policy realities is in some cases attributable to anti-Semitism. Just anti-Jewish. “I don't like Jews.” Or, “The Jews are doing this.” That kind of thing. And when that happened, I guess I bristled at it more than some of my colleagues used to. It troubled me deeply. I don't think I ever made an unfair judgment about any officer. I never called anybody an anti-Semite in private or on paper. But I made some professional judgments sometimes about officers when I was Director of Near Eastern Affairs and, before that, deputy director. I made judgments also when I was Director of Personnel for a while. I thought certain officers should not be put in positions where their known personal biases were going to color their reporting. It was unfair to them and it was certainly not conducive to the kind of reporting that we needed.

We had also, I think, a peculiar situation because once one became an Arabist, once he was in Washington in particular working on one of their desks, he was going to be besieged by the Israeli embassy and by American Jewish interests who were interested in

that part of the world. One could look at this in various ways. You could take it as a fact of life, you learned to deal with it, to listen, to respond in ways that were as non-controversial as possible, but to recognize that these people had a right to do this and that so long as they were not approaching you financially or something like that, that they were not doing anything wrong. I found a lot of colleagues were unable to deal with that. To the degree that these officers bristled when they had to deal with the Israelis and with the American Jewish community and were unable to communicate effectively with them, to that degree those people became in the eyes of the beholders on the other side, anti- Semites.

And, of course, let's face it, in some cases even if they weren't, they were so labeled because the labeling enabled the other side to do them down.

Q: There's the reverse side of the coin there. I'd like to move on now to your first post after Arabic training. You had what seems like a dream post, going to Kuwait—this is 1953 to 1955—as principal officer. How did this assignment come about and what were your responsibilities?

SYMMES: Well, that's very strange because I remember when we were being briefed in the Foreign Service Institute by people from the Near East. One of these persons I referred to earlier who impressed me very much said, “Those of you who are not specializing in European affairs may find the easiest way to get to London or Paris or Madrid or Rome is to become a Near Eastern specialist, because there are three positions in London, two in Paris, and so on down the line for which you can qualify in your mid to more senior grades as a specialist.” And I can recall that when I took Arabic that was one of the thoughts that entered my mind. “This is how I'm going to get to London.” [Laughter]

On the other hand, we recognized, those of us who were interested in the Arab world, that it had some pretty despicable posts. I can recall a colleague of mine who served in both Port Said and in Aden who said he had served at both orifices of the Red Sea. [Laughter] And he didn't mean the oral orifice when he was talking about this. [Laughter] So we knew

there were a certain number of unhealthful and hardship posts at which we would be asked to serve.

I had studied Arabic on my own in Egypt and made some progress. The Department found out about this, and then I was given money to spend an hour or two a day studying colloquial Arabic in Syria. I had made considerable progress in Arabic, and so when I applied to take language and area training in Washington—it was for a year's assignment — I'd made a decision that, “Okay. We're going to do this because, I'm terribly interested in it. It has any number of challenging problems. It's a key area of the world. It's poorly understood. I think I can make a contribution of some kind. It has some stinking posts and so what we'll have to do is take those stinking posts when we're young and can face up to them and then hopefully get some good posts later on.”

So after I'd finished my training, and we'd had delays in promotion because of McCarthyism and John Foster Dulles coming in and so on, I saw the opportunity to have my own post in Kuwait as a tremendous one. So we went into it with our eyes open but perhaps not open enough, and it was a terribly difficult post physically. I can go into some of the reasons if you want. First of all, my predecessor had done almost nothing to fix up the post and make it habitable. For example, when I arrived, the Consulate's accounts had not been sent in for six months. The office was just incredibly disorganized, even chaotic. I went there with my wife and two small children, one only five months old and one just over two years. We had a hell of a time with the living conditions. But we figured we'd get this behind us and then we'd be qualified for something better. Another factor was that we would be in charge. We'd be running the post. . .

Q: What was our interest and what was the situation in Kuwait? We're talking about '53 to '55.

SYMMES: The really productive, what you might call gusher oil wells, had just been discovered in Kuwait prior to my arriving there. The Kuwait oil concession was jointly

owned by British and American interests, the American interest being Gulf Oil. And down in the Kuwait-Saudi Arabia Neutral Zone, a group of other American oil companies had gotten a concession. The oil reserves in the Middle East had been a matter of deep contention between the British and the American governments for decades, even before the First World War. It was with great difficulty that Gulf and other American companies had managed to obtain concessions, and this was a continuing concern to us. In other words, we watched how the British dealt with their concessions, because if they messed them up as they had done to a certain extent in Iran just before 1953, to that degree concessions all over the place would be messed up. So our concern was for the American ownership of those concessions in Kuwait, for how the British dealt with their concession, and then the larger strategic interests that I've referred to, that is the so-called Soviet march to the Persian Gulf, or the desire to come down and take over the oil fields because the Soviets knew about these oil fields, as well. That was the main strategic interest there and why we had a consulate. Our consulate when I went there in '53 was only two years old. It had been opened in '51 with great difficulty because the British did not want us to have a presence there. We were the only other country represented in Kuwait. The British had what was called a special political relationship with Kuwait. That special political relationship meant that the British government was responsible for the defense and foreign affairs of Kuwait. The political formula went on to say that Kuwait was an independent sheikhdom in special treaty relationship with the British government.

The British had let us in, but they were very unhappy about our being there. So I found, as my predecessor and subsequent people found, also, that one of the things we had to do was to secure our relationship with the British and to make sure that we didn't disturb them too much. The British personnel who staffed what was called a political agency in Kuwait and the political residency in Bahrain were mostly people who had come out of the British political service in India, the Indian civil service and political service.

Q: India having achieved its independence a few years before.

SYMMES: That's right. They were colored with the Raj mentality I must tell you. Some of them had also come out of the Sudan political service, but it was a colonialists' mentality. There were exceptions. There were some very fine British people that I met in the Gulf. But there was that mentality, and they tended to see us as usurpers. And also they thought we had some very bad ideas about how to treat the local people and so on.

It was a terribly interesting time in Kuwait. There was a surge of Arab nationalism because of Nasser having taken over in Egypt a few years before. At that time there were a number of Moslem Brothers who were opposed to Nasser in exile in Kuwait. But nevertheless, there were enough Syrian nationalists and Lebanese and Palestinian nationalists to prevent the Moslem Brothers from dominating political thinking in Kuwait. The result was that there was a real ferment of Arab nationalism, something we later called — when I was in intelligence research on the Middle East in Washington in the later '50s — radical pan-Arab nationalism. Well, this was just spreading all over the place in Kuwait and at the time, I'm sorry to say, the British were almost oblivious to it. Luckily I was able, through a number of sources, and other people were, too, to make contacts with some of these people and to report on what was happening. It was happening in Bahrain, it was happening in Kuwait, it was happening in the eastern province of Saudi Arabia. Luckily there were some very forward-thinking and forward-looking people in the Arabian-American oil company who saw this and who took steps in their relationship with Saudi Arabia to try to promote and encourage middle class, non-royal family elements so that they would have a stake in the maintenance of then existing situation of Saudi Arabia.

But there was a real ferment and we had the tendency to label, and the British would do this because they knew it appealed to our susceptibilities, to label any kind of Arab nationalist feeling, thought or action as communist. And I can't tell you how many communists were pointed to in that little sheikhdom of Kuwait. [Laughter] And I don't think there was a one there to tell you the truth.

Q: What sort of instruction or interests were coming from Washington and the State Department at that time?

SYMMES: At the time, very little. And this was a disappointment. The man in charge of the Arabian Peninsula desk was a Foreign Service officer born in India and I thought he was a very unenlightened person. He was terribly pro- British. He was married to a British woman and he considered my reporting, believe it or not, to be anti-British, and there was probably no more Anglophile a person than I was, basically. [Laughter] So the general view in Washington at the time was there were larger fish to fry in Egypt and they still had the Middle East Defense Organization concept, Baghdad Pact concept, that they were working on and piddling with. And not a great deal of attention was paid to this political ferment I referred to in Kuwait. We were concerned with such things as contingency plans in case the balloon went up, what we would do if . . .

Q: How to evacuate people . . .

SYMMES: Yes, how to evacuate but also how to protect the oil installations, to blow them up or whatever. So I am afraid that my reporting at the time—which I thought was terrific—didn't cause any great ripples in Washington. [Laughter]

Q: Now we're talking about coming back to Washington in 1955. You were in Intelligence and Research for a while and then you were on the Greek/Turkish/Iranian desk. Then you were special assistant to Assistant Secretary for Near East and African Affairs, William Rountree. This is from '57 to '59. Maybe just briefly treating your INR time, what were your responsibilities and our concerns at the time?

SYMMES: I left Kuwait disappointed, hoping that I was going to go back to a political desk in Washington, but having had a lack of communication with the desk officer, I had no chance of that. The opportunity came to go to Intelligence Research and I welcomed it, although many of my colleagues thought I was stupid at the time. It seemed to me to be

a way to continue to broaden my knowledge of the area and to use the language. I went back and was on the Arabian Peninsula. That was my bailiwick, I was to do research on that area both in terms of current intelligence and also in terms of what was called the national intelligence survey.

In terms of the latter, my responsibilities were to write an account of the constitutional systems of the Arabian Peninsula, the political dynamics and so on. I wrote both of those sections over the course of two years and did some really fascinating research. I was able to use Italian at that time in addition to Arabic, and there were a lot of good sources in Italian. I was able to use Italian, to read Italian. Much of the scholarly work in between the two wars had been done by Italians in Saudi Arabia and the Peninsula and in Yemen and so on. Oriente Moderno, a magazine, was the finest at the time, a scholarly magazine.

So that assignment gave me an opportunity to really broaden my knowledge of the area and at the same time to do a lot of current intelligence work, even though I was on the Arabian Peninsula. In terms of current intelligence, I had to keep track of the whole Near Eastern area. When my turn came (about one week a month), I had to brief the head of Intelligence Research who would later brief the Secretary on what was happening in the Near East. Now this was, of course, the time of the Suez Canal crisis and also of the later British/French/Israeli intervention. So it was an exciting period.

In terms of what I did on Greece, Turkey and Iran, that also was in Intelligence Research. What I was doing there was essentially to manage that branch of research because I had no intimate knowledge of any of those three places and what I was doing was directing and reviewing the research of subordinate analysts. By this time, I guess people who hadn't liked my reporting or what I did in Kuwait had vanished from the scene and other people who had liked my reporting and so on decided that I was an asset that could be used. So I was picked up to be Special Assistant for Policy Planning to Bill Rountree. He was Assistant Secretary for Near Eastern and South Asian Affairs. That policy planning job consisted to a very large extent of continuing a policy coordinating relationship we'd had

with the British about how to deal with Nasser, how to deal with the Arab-Israeli situation with and through Nasser, how to deal with what was the terrible situation that was left after the British/French/Israeli intervention. And to put it quite baldly, I can remember Bill Rountree telling me this, that my mission was to keep track of what the intelligence people, both British and American, were trying to do in the Middle East and in a sense to play along with them to see what they were trying to do, whether they were going to do something that was really in our overall political interest as established by the White House and the Department, and to prosecute that. I mean, to help it along. And where it wasn't in our interest, to make sure he and other people who could do something about it knew about it.

Q: Now you've been in INR, you'd had Kuwait and Syria, you had a chance to observe a bit. Again this is an unclassified interview. How would you describe our intelligence? I'm speaking of the operations of the CIA—I guess it was the CIA at that time. How effective were they? What did you think of what was going on?

SYMMES: This was a very strange period in our foreign policy history. We had the two Dulles brothers. I think anyone who's seen the recent television series on secret intelligence doesn't need me to describe how unrealistic in many ways our intelligence activities were in the Middle East.

Q: John Foster Dulles was the Secretary of State and Allen Dulles was the head of CIA.

SYMMES: That's right. We were actively intervening - - in very ham-handed ways in some cases — all over the landscape. In some cases we were continuing to do this because of relationships we'd had with the British before the Suez crisis, which greatly soured our relationship. And, of course, relationships we'd had before the discovery of the British moles, Philby and Company. We'd worked very closely with the British. We exchanged very sensitive information with them in the early and mid '50s, really until the Philby and Suez crises came along.

Q: The Philby crisis being a very high British intelligence agent, Kim Philby, who defected to the Soviet Union and had been an agent of the Soviet Union.

SYMMES: Right. And who'd been in Washington and who just exposed things to the Soviets all over the place.

Well, I found that we had some ongoing relationships with the British which were—you could oversimplify by calling them piecing-off relationships. In other words there were things we were doing with them simply to have them think that Philby and the Suez Canal crisis hadn't had all that much effect on our relationships. [Laughter] But at the same time we were being very, very careful about what we really did with them. But we had to continue these relationships outwardly.

Q: We were doing things but all the time saying, "Well, if this goes to one of their potential moles, it won't kill us. So we'll hold this back."

SYMMES: That's right.

Q: So this was very much in our thinking at the time?

SYMMES: Yes. At the same time, John Foster Dulles had never learned to deal with what we now call the Third World - - with the neutralists. To him neutralism was a sin. You were either for us or against us.

So Nasser was one of the chief sinners in the world. Well, Nasser was there and Arab nationalism was a very potent force at the time. We overemphasized the importance of the force of it and made it stronger by doing so. I happened at that time to have a very strong view that Nasser was not a communist, he wasn't pro-communist, that he was just an extreme nationalist and that therefore we should find a way to deal with him. At this time we had several other problems. We had what to do about the Baghdad Pact, we had the problem what to do about Syria, we had the continuing Arab-Israeli problem with all

its ramifications, and we had a problem of what to do with Lebanon. Because John Foster Dulles in one of his bad moments had given the President of Lebanon a blank check. The President of Lebanon was not supposed to be re-elected and John Foster Dulles had made a statement which could have been interpreted as our saying, “If you can find a way to get the Parliament to let you be re-elected, we'll support it.” Well, this man happened to be very strongly anti-Nasser.

Q: Was this Chamoun?

SYMMES: This was Camille Chamoun. At that time, some of our people and the British had developed a little club—let's call it that unclassified—constituted of Chamoun, King Hussein of Jordan, Nuri Said of Iraq, and King Sa'ud, a real cipher who was King of Saudi Arabia at the time. These four mongrels were supposed to be our defense against communism and the extremes of Arab nationalism in the Middle East. A big joke, let me tell you. The British and some Americans actively believed that this “club” was a potent force and that something could be accomplished with it. Actually it was penetrated by Syrian intelligence, not to mention, I'm sure, Soviet intelligence and was a big joke. Our fooling around with this thing — to the extent it had any affect at all — had an effect counter to what we wanted by strengthening the Nasser forces.

We had the Lebanese crisis in 1958 and I was responsible for many of the policy papers then, which, I have to tell you, in many ways were attempts to get up to John Foster Dulles a decision recommendation which would say, “Get the blank check back from Chamoun and stop being this way about Nasser and be realistic about the Baghdad Pact.” At one point, we had a study almost completed that would have pulled us out of our then position in the Baghdad Pact and made that one of my “cutting losses” situations.

Q: Cutting losses situation.

SYMMES: It was just at that point that the Lebanese crisis blew up.

Q: Around '58.

SYMMES: Yes. The Baghdad revolt took place and at that point Eisenhower and Dulles, for all the wrong reasons, decided that we had to go into Lebanon when the problem was in Iraq. [Laughter] In any case, it was a real shambles and I think any person who is interested in how badly our foreign policy worked at the time and how many dangers we almost fell into ought to study closely that Lebanon situation.

Q: Where was William Rountree on all this?

SYMMES: He was the Assistant Secretary. He had been, prior to 1955, Minister Counselor in Ankara. He was not at first a career Foreign Service officer. He had come through the Civil Service. He was a very talented man in many ways, a good manager. Very quiet and in some ways almost self-effacing, not understood by most of his colleagues. I learned to develop a real admiration for his way of operating. I think he had a far better and larger grasp of foreign policy than most of his colleagues gave him credit for.

But anyway, he was the Assistant Secretary and he was considered to be a Loy Henderson prot#g# — Loy Henderson then being the Deputy Under Secretary for Administration and so-called “Mr. Foreign Service,” who I might say parenthetically had a lot of bad ideas which were ultimately bad for the Foreign Service. At any rate, Loy Henderson had been a key person in bringing Bill back to be Assistant Secretary for the Near East and South Asia and so on. Bill was supposed to be at least more objective about Nasser and Arab nationalism than some of his predecessors like Byroade. So Bill, I thought, was a very effective bureaucrat.

Q: What were your experiences dealing with this problem? I mean, obviously, you felt that we should view Nasserism and the nationalism with much more objectivity. When getting us up to the Dulles action level, how effective was he and did you feel that you were kind of pushing Rountree?

SYMMES: Well, it was difficult to push Bill Rountree. If he didn't see that there was something to be done, you weren't going to push him. Bill, we used to say, had the pulse rate of a frog. [Laughter] If there's an opportunity, I want to tell you about effective diplomacy later on. Remind me of it with Bill.

My opportunities were this. When I got to this job, I inherited a number of policy studies of various kinds of terribly top-secret NODIS types of projects that had been going on about how to deal with the Arab-Israeli problem — such as settlement in Sinai of Palestinian refugees, all kinds of very far out ideas. I can't go into those for classified reasons. But I'd inherited these things and Bill had told me to keep studying these things and to produce recommendations for him, which I did. At the same time, you know, we had an Office of Near Eastern Affairs in existence. They obviously were supposed to be executing our policies. Bill found them, I think, a little bit too day-to-day and not strategic enough in their thinking. So I had to be very careful not to get into difficulty with my colleagues there and at the same time do what Bill wanted. The way I was able to deal with this was, I'd get Bill or somebody else high up to call for a national intelligence estimate and we would pose the question something like, “What do you do about Arab nationalism?” They were frequently leading questions. But in those days the Office of National Estimates willingly lent itself to those kinds of leading questions. And so we would, by asking leading questions, frequently be able to get so-called objective estimates out of the intelligence agency that would support a particular kind of policy recommendation that we wanted to make. Also, out of those ongoing relationships with the special British/American group I told you about and the intelligence agencies, recommendations would come up in very super-secret channels by which I would be able to make a recommendation that Bill would send up to the Secretary. Sometimes the Secretary himself would ask Bill a question which Bill would then pose in terms that I could write a memorandum for him in reply.

I was called to go with Bill only twice to see Secretary Dulles on recommendations that had been made for policy changes. In one case it was changing our policy toward Nasser

and part of the recommendation was supported by an intelligence estimate that had a much more objective view about what Nasserism was and where it was going to go. And I can recall Bill taking me up and introducing me to Dulles, who sort of grumbled and nodded, and I then briefly whisked through the chief recommendations of this estimate, a short one-page summary. The Secretary's response to me was, “Has Allen Dulles seen this?”

I said, “Yes, sir.”

“What did he think?”

“Well, as the intelligence estimate indicates, he dissented from a certain aspect of it.”

“Has Quarles seen this?” Quarles then being in the Defense Department, what would be a deputy secretary today.

“Yes, sir.”

“What does he think?”

“He subscribes to Allen Dulles' views.” [Laughter]

“Well, I won't approve this.”

And that was the end of that. He did approve the canceling of the check to Chamoun, but as I say that was overtaken by events.I might just throw something out here that occurs to me. We had some very, very peculiar extra-diplomatic relationships in those days. This was a time of fast and loose intelligence agency and non-diplomatic relationships with various Middle Eastern personages. You didn't know who might be working for CIA or British intelligence in those days. There were newspaper people or quasi-newspaper people, all sorts of so-called consultants and entrepreneurs floating around the Middle East who had immediate access to Chamoun, Hussein or Sa'ud or Nuri Sa'id or whoever.

And in some cases even Nasser. Some of them were even working for Nasser. So you had all kinds of strange and queer things happening. The people who are interested in understanding the Lebanese situation, for example, should invoke the Freedom of Information Act and try to look at some of the telegrams and dispatches of the then Ambassador Rob McClintock in Beirut. The troubles and trials and tribulations he had because of the kinds of other relationships that the United States government or people in the United States government had with Chamoun and other actors on the Lebanese scene.

Q: These tended to move within different foreign policies for different agencies.

SYMMES: Different foreign policies. Yes. And sometimes counter to what our stated foreign policies were. It was terribly confusing. Some people have written books about it — Eveland, for example, has written a book in which he reveals parts of his role and makes himself come out smelling like a rose. Actually, he wasn't a rose.

Q: Was this The Road to Suez or something?

SYMMES: No. Something, the Sands—what was it called— Bill Eveland. It has the word “sands” in the title. But in any case, it was fantastic in that you never knew what was happening. So, anyway, I found Rountree was able to stay above this and to keep his fingers on it much better than many other people could have. I cannot tell you to this day what Bill Rountree really thought about Dulles. Bill Rountree was, I think, the way a foreign policy professional ought to be. In other words, if you take a job, you do it until it compromises your integrity and then you leave it. Even though you may personally disagree with some aspects of it, once you've stated your point of view and you're overruled, unless you find that it's something you cannot accept ethically or morally, then you carry it out. That's the way Bill Rountree operated.

Q: So you felt he was really a very effective person in this.

SYMMES: Well, let's put it this way. I was frustrated as I'm certain many of my colleagues were at the time and would have tended to say at the time probably that if we had some more dynamic and imaginative person, we could get something done more realistically in the Middle East. But I don't think that was possible because of Dulles and the nature of his hold on the President and in the establishment generally. And the relationship he had, of course, with his own brother over in Central Intelligence. I think you have to be realistic about it. No one, no matter who, could have done much more than Bill Rountree was doing.

Q: So part of the activism in the CIA was because you had a Secretary of State, perhaps because of fraternal relationship, who was not saying "hold" enough as far as some of the intelligence business that was going on.

SYMMES: Well, let's put it this way. John Foster Dulles had taken the view that anything we can do to bring down these neutralists, anti-imperialists, anti-colonialists, extreme nationalists regimes should be done. He had taken a moral decision that that was the right thing to do. Thus, he sort of gave a mandate to NSC at the time with a White House blessing— he had given a mandate to Allen Dulles to do this. And, of course, Allen Dulles just unleashed people, many of whom were very good operatives. I don't want anything I say to indicate that I don't have a very high opinion of most of my CIA colleagues. They did a good job and they were doing the same thing the rest of us had to do in many cases, having to do things they didn't particularly think should be done. But there were some people over there also who were utterly unprincipled. They would go off—just like the Iran-Contra thing, they weren't being properly watched, and people who should have known what they were doing, didn't know or thought they were doing the right thing. Kind of getting our hands caught in the cookie jar, things that happened were just amazing. We were caught out in attempted coups, ham-handed operations of all kinds. Part of my job, to go back to what I told you earlier, was to try to keep track of some of these dirty tricks that were being planned in the Near East so that if they were just utterly impossible, we'd

get them killed before they got any further. And we succeeded in doing that in some cases. But we couldn't get all of them killed.

Q: One other factor before we move on. We're talking about the late '50s. It's my understanding that the Israeli lobby was not the well-oiled machine, particularly in Congress and in the political world, that it became in the later '60s and through the '70s. But it was obviously a factor there. How much did this play a role in our Middle East decisions that personally impinged on the work that you were doing?

SYMMES: Well, let's put it this way. I think that you're correct in stating that it wasn't nearly the well-organized machine that it later became with AIPAC, American- Israel Public Affairs Committee. And then the AJC, American Jewish Committee local reps and so on, they weren't nearly as well organized as they later became. But then on the other hand, it wasn't as necessary for them—that is for the American Jewish lobby, per se—Americans to be interfering, because what was happening was that the constellation of forces in the Middle East was such that even the Arabs in many cases were anti-Nasser. And Nasser was considered to be the chief threat against Israel—Nasser and Syria. And you had the UAR connection later on. To a very real extent, Lebanon, Jordan, Saudi Arabia and Iraq wouldn't agree with UAR nationalist policies and in many cases were unwittingly serving Israeli and American Jewish supporters of Israel interests by being very, very anti-Nasser, if you see what I mean.

Q: I see.

SYMMES: In other words, it was an indirect way of dealing with the chief anti-Israeli force. So they didn't need to lobby much or interfere. Thus, I found most of my contacts, to the extent I was sought out—people very quickly find out what you do, of course, in the State Department—that I was chiefly approached by the Israeli intelligence and political people in the embassy. And you lunched with them and that sort of thing, were invited to parties

and so on. I can't remember that any American Jewish people per se bothered me at all at that time.

Q: Moving to your next series of assignments—you had two— you were in Benghazi and then in Tripoli from 1959 to 1962. This seems to be a real backwater in the Arab world. You haven't mentioned Libya at all in the whole Arab matrix.

SYMMES: That's right.

Q: How was it? Was it a backwater at that time? What were you doing?

SYMMES: Well, it was in some ways very much like Kuwait. Oil had just been discovered when I went there. This was an opportunity again for me to get a job with more responsibility than my actual rank would have allowed. I was, therefore, happy to be going there. Libya, because of the discovery of oil, was seen as a possibly potent force in helping to do something about North Africa. To help in Tunisia. We had the Algerian problem. We needed some other kind of . . .

Q: At that point Algeria was still under French rule.

SYMMES: Yes. And there was a great civil war going on. This was the height of the war between the French and the Algerian rebels. Libya was where the exiled Algerian government had many of its meetings and they kept a very strong representation there. And one of my jobs was to stay in touch with the chief Algerian representative. In fact, I did that. It was a lot of fun.

In a way, as you say, it was a backwater. It had very little to do with the Arab-Israeli problem. Palestinians were flocking in to get jobs in the oil fields and in the burgeoning contractor enterprises. And, of course, as they came in, more and more the Libyans began to appreciate the Arab-Israeli problem and Arab nationalism. By the time I was leaving there, we had in many respects a repeat of what I described in the Persian Gulf. In other

words, the Libyans had become politicized in terms of Arab nationalism. And seeing this oil wealth coming in, for want of a better term, what you would call a middle class or the unestablished power group were concerned about what was going to be done with the oil money and what it meant for them.

Q: What was our policy? Were we supporting the king or were we looking towards reaching out to what we hoped would be a more peaceful form of change of government, rather than what eventually came in with the Qadhafi situation?

SYMMES: Well, I neglected to mention what was at that time our chief interest apart from oil, which was the Wheelus Air Force Base. When I went there that Base Agreement was just coming up for revision. One of the things that I worked on, particularly the first year or two, was a revision and a renegotiation of that treaty relationship. Wheelus Air Force Base was terribly important to us then in terms of the strategic relationship with the Soviet Union as well as—and I meant the bomber deterrent, but it wasn't a bomber base. It was important for refueling and for support of the Strategic Air Force. It was primarily a training base for fighters that we used in this strategic organization we had for Europe. So we wanted very much to have that relationship preserved and we saw in the then existing political situation in Libya, support of the king as the best way to bring that about. Now, we were by no means oblivious as I say to burgeoning political forces. I spent a lot of my time developing contacts with so-called radicals at the time.

What's so funny about this is that I met a Libyan a few months ago, whom I'd known when in Libya. He came over here and a whole bunch of us got together with him. He was allowed to come to this country even though he's anti-Qadhafi. I was asking him about some of the so-called extremists I'd known at the time, what had happened to them. Well they were considered conservatives by Qadhafi when he came in. And Qadhafi, by using his military power, really established a personal dictatorship. There were very few political people who were involved in what he did, even today. So these so-called extremists at the time that we saw as potential challengers to the throne, in a very tame way simply

because they wanted a parliament and a little bit more opportunity to express their views, those people fell by the wayside and would be considered reactionaries by Qadhafi.

Q: Harry, you've pointed to, it seems to me, one of the problems that faces our political apparatus. I'm speaking of the political reporting apparatus. And that is, when we try to identify and to be on friendly terms with potential people who might take over when there's a movement, so often it comes to the military and the military—our military, anybody's military- -they don't talk to anybody. They don't even talk to other military. I mean, it's a very enclosed society, and when they take over, it probably means that they haven't had much contact with the outside world. Even our attach#s don't get very far in this. This seems to be true in every country I can think of probably.

SYMMES: Well, you're quite correct. In some ways we have ourselves to blame for this because we have a self- denying ordinance when we have a military assistance advisory group. Those people are told, as part of the whole doctrine when you send out a MAAG mission, those people are told they are not to serve any intelligence function. In other words, they are not to spy on the local people. And many of them were very meticulous about this. You couldn't get a MAAG officer in Libya or other places to tell you certain kinds of things — couldn't get them to write biographical data. They wouldn't tell you about inter-relationships and so on because they would consider it to be compromising their MAAG mission. Now that's a self-denying ordinance of some proportions. Now whether the people in the MAAG in Libya at the time knew Qadhafi, who had some training in the States—in a lot of cases we had trained some of the most important junior to mid-grade officers in countries like Libya — but whether they had ever reported anything or not I can't tell you. But I know at the time I was there, the head of the MAAG mission would just refuse to do anything that in his view compromised his MAAG instructions and relationships. So that's one of the reasons we didn't know anything about these people.

Q: That's a very interesting thing, because this has been repeated again and again and again.

SYMMES: Exactly. Yes.

Q: Who is this lieutenant colonel who's suppressing most ambassadors after a coup? Ask, “Does anybody know him?” and the answer is usually a series of blank faces on the country team.

SYMMES: Yes. And it is precisely for that reason. Now, obviously, intelligence people and political officers on embassy staffs try to find these things out. And, of course, sometimes they have so many other irons in the fire that perhaps they aren't as assiduous as they should be. But in many cases their MAAG colleagues simply won't tell them. They won't do anything about it. That's the way it used to be.

Q: After you left, you spent a year at Harvard, which I'll sort of jump over because then you came to a very important job. You were deputy and then country director for Israel and Arab-Israeli relations. We're talking about the period from 1964 to 1966?

SYMMES: Well, yes. 1963-66.

Q: What were your responsibilities and what were the problems you had?

SYMMES: Well, there had been a change of administration in '60. Kennedy came in and appointed some very bright people with fresh looks at the middle eastern situation, one of whom was Phillips Talbot who became Assistant Secretary for Near Eastern and South Asian Affairs.

In my year at Harvard—I was up there supposedly doing policy thinking and actually doing that—I got word that the policy planning staff wanted me to come down and, in fact, I was interviewed by Walt Rostow and Henry Owen, and I was looking forward to that. I was assigned to the policy planning staff at nearly the end of my year at Harvard. I got down to Washington and I was told by Rodger Davies, who was then Director of Near Eastern Affairs—whom I called because we were very old and very close personal friends—”Your

assignment has been broken. You're going to become my deputy." I hadn't even been asked if I'd like to do it. [Laughter]

Well, it turns out that this was because Phillips Talbot had read some of the papers that I had written when I worked for Bill Rountree. He said, "We want this guy in NE." Near Eastern Affairs.

So I came down to work for Rodger. It was a wonderful atmosphere. I knew Bob Komer, who was then on the staff of Mac Bundy in the White House. He was sort of bird-dogging Middle Eastern affairs. As I say, Phil Talbot gave people a lot of leeway to develop positions. And Rodger said, "In addition to being my deputy, with all that entails, I want you to be especially in charge of personnel to make sure that we've got all the right people in our posts overseas." At that time we even made recommendations for chiefs of mission.

Q: It became so political.

SYMMES: Yes. Very exciting time. So I worked as deputy and then . . .

Q: Could you describe Rodger Davies and his operating style?

SYMMES: Rodger was very knowledgeable about the Middle East. He was, I would say, more a generalist than a person who became involved in details. He had a good view of the overall picture. He was a good bureaucrat. He could see the forest rather than the trees. He was a well-balanced person. Rodger recognized that Israel was a fact of life. He never let himself be nettled, irritated too much by the pressure groups. At that time they were really fierce. He didn't get himself ever too identified with anything that would become controversial and sometimes, I think, some of his colleagues felt that he was a bit too unwilling to become engaged, that sometimes he didn't do battle when he should have.

But I found it a joy to work for Rodger. He gave me a great deal of scope. He listened to me. I always had an opportunity to disagree and say it over and over again if I wanted

to. [Laughter] He was judicious and he was well respected by his colleagues, I thought, both junior and those who were superior to him. He had a kind of persona that a lot of people associated with being a good Foreign Service officer. He was tall and good looking and expressed himself well in a dignified way. Quite clearly he was on his way to the top. I might just say that Rodger had a very unfortunate situation, in that his wife developed cancer when he was in Baghdad in the mid or late '50s so he had to come back to Washington. He turned down a chief of mission job in Africa and, in fact, got some bad marks because he did so. He didn't want to take his wife and family in that situation to such a post. That sort of hung over his head and then for years he couldn't accept a position overseas because of his wife's health.

So the result was that he got into a rut and by the time the end of the '60s came, Rodger was considered sort of overburdened with the Arab-Israeli situation and so on. And more flashy people like Sisco came along and Rodger—his wife had died—was not really given an opportunity to go out and take charge of a post where he could have shown all of his wonderful qualities. Well, I didn't mean to . . .

Q: He went to Cyprus.

SYMMES: Yes. He went to Cyprus and, of course, was killed there by Greek terrorists.

Q: What were some of the problems that you were involved in during this period?

SYMMES: One of the main problems was . . .

Q: Harry, in dealing with the Near East with both the Eisenhower Administration and then the Kennedy Administration, was there a difference in approach, would you say, with Kennedy- -other than that the situation had changed—that you noticed from your vantage point?

SYMMES: Oh, very definitely. An approach that was both substantive and procedural—procedure, really. There was much more contact between the Kennedy White House and the State Department at all levels then there had been in my experience in the Eisenhower Administration.

In the Eisenhower Administration, of course, the NSC staff was somewhat differently formed and there was, as you may remember, something called the Operations Coordinating Board, which was another sort of liaison between the two. But the contacts at the working level were much fewer under Eisenhower and such as there were, I think, were much less effective. Whereas in the Kennedy White House, there was a very intimate and close contact between the working level and the NSC staff and the working level in the State Department and the Defense Department and so on.

Q: It was the nucleus of the working relationship, rather than adversarial relationship would you say?

SYMMES: It was both. It could become adversarial. On the other hand, if one stuck by his guns he could be listened to and might be knocked down and disagreed with. Particularly, dealing with someone like Bob Komer. I don't know if you know Bob or not. Bob is a very cantankerous personality but I'd known him . . .

Q: Blowtorch by some chance?

SYMMES: That's right. [Laughter] But I'd known Bob earlier on and so I had a good relationship with him in terms of knowing how to stand up to him and what not. So in that period of the mid '60s and early '60s, I had a very effective, I thought, working relationship with Bob. Even in the adversarial aspects of it, it was good because at least we knew we were being listened to and we were able to modify our strategies and approaches to take account of what we recognized would be some obstacles in the White House.

Of course, the Kennedy White House was much more disposed to listen to new points of view, different ways of dealing with things. They didn't have the options papers yet. But what are the options? I mean, is there some other way we could deal with this? I think they were even prepared to deal with what I would call cutting losses. I suppose that grew out of Kennedy's very early experience in the Cuban invasion.

Q: Cuban invasion . . .

SYMMES: Yes. The Bay of Pigs.

There were some very definite influences that were counter to that. I always thought that Bobby Kennedy, and to a certain extent Averell Harriman and Maxwell Taylor had undue, unwarranted, and sometimes unwelcome influence on the conduct of policy. I thought they had some points of view that were much more resistant to different ways of looking at problems than they should have.

Q: You mean they were almost traditionalists, or at least seeing things in the light of that this was East-West confrontation? Because this seems to be the mold that so much of our policy falls into. It's us versus them.

SYMMES: Yes. I would say it was a—I hope not to over simplify—little bit the continuation of the we/they bad guys/good guys Cold War remnants. They were more sophisticated about it. In other words, we were supposed to be dealing with trying to prevent proxy wars in situations that would produce proxy wars by making analyses of the factors involved so that we could somehow manipulate them. And those things became very over-simplified. There were sort of rigid outlines of how to make a country analysis and how you were going to deal with it. And it was a little bit the Cold War approach in the end, however.

Q: What were your major responsibilities during this period?

SYMMES: Well, the Office of Near Eastern Affairs handled the day-to-day relations with all of the Arab states in the Near East. Now this excluded North Africa, except for Egypt. It excluded Sudan by that time. But Egypt was part of the Near East situation, whereas Libya, Sudan, Algeria and Tunis were Arab states that were in North Africa. In addition to the Arab states of the Near East, it included Israel.

I thought that it was probably the best kind of organization we could have for the conduct of policy because each of the states had a desk officer. There were groupings of states such as Jordan and Israel, Syria and Lebanon, Iraq and Saudi Arabia which were brought under the same desk officers because they could be looked at that way. All of those were then brought together in the focus of the Office itself under the Director, who was when I went there Rodger Davies.

Israel had its own desk officer and, of course, had to be looked at at the office level in terms of its relationship with all the Arab states. That, as you may recall, was changed to my regret and chagrin in 1966—at the end of 1965. Instead they set up something called Israel and Arab-Israeli Affairs under a Country Director. And thereby they made it much less easy to deal with Israel in the context of its relationship with all of the Arab states and to look at all the Arab states in the context of their relationships with each other. That was abolished overnight by the establishment of the country director system.

Q: Was there method in this madness? Was there a reason?

SYMMES: Well, the best excuse, if you want to call it that, that I ever heard for this change was that Crockett and some other people who had looked at the conduct of foreign policy . . .

Q: William Crockett was a . . .

SYMMES: He was the Deputy Under Secretary for Administration at that time. And he and a number of other people, most of whom were not career Foreign Service people,

had decided that the public, the newspaper world and so on, were finding it difficult to find somebody they could talk to at a responsible level about a given country's relationship with the United States. Well, that was absurd because Rodger Davies or I could talk about Iraq separately from the other Arab states and so on. But the important thing about being able to deal with those interlocutors about a given state was that we did it in the context of the whole area rather than in isolation. An over-simplification which we could avoid. And so they were responding to what they said were pressures from the outside that there be a responsible officer who could say what our policy is toward Iraq, or what our policy is toward Jordan, and that person should be called a country director and should be the equivalent of a chief of mission.

Well, it was unrealistic, first of all, to think we could ever possibly restaff the Foreign Service to give people rank at that level and we never did it. The country director system, in my opinion, was a travesty.

Q: Then this was done all over. And so there was nothing Machiavellian about what happened in the Near East. It seems to give Israel a little extra prominence than not.

SYMMES: Let's put it this way. While I don't recall any express agitation on the part of the Jewish community for it, most of the supporters of Israel would have said that they wanted somebody responsible in charge of Israel affairs and they didn't want to have to talk somebody who is responsible for a lot of Arab states as well. So to that extent, there was a certain amount of calculation in it. I don't think that that was a major influence in the change.

Q: Really we're talking about a case of administrative muddling in order to have a new thing coming from outside the practical working thing.

SYMMES: That's right.

Q: It's coming away with a solution that really didn't work out very well.

SYMMES: Exactly. It was a typical way of our dealing with personnel problems. In other words, if you have a personnel problem, if you've got a square peg in a round hole, instead of changing the peg, change the whole system. [Laughter] Which is what we have always done with personnel.

Q: This is what I say is "the great cross" of the Foreign Service—that the system has been changed. In fact, people are so cynical now that they don't respond to sometimes really substantive changes because they think it's just more of the same old thing.

SYMMES: Exactly. I've always said that if we would just let any of the personnel systems that we've had, in the time that I have known the Foreign Service, work for two or three years we'd find that they worked very well. But we're never content to leave them alone.

Well, the country director system was organized and, in my opinion, we have never had similarly effective conduct of foreign relations that we had in the early mid '60s under the old system. I might just say parenthetically that I think the NEA, that's Near Eastern and South Asia area, could have been modified in some ways without having all of the changes that took place and that those modifications would have been desirable. For example, there was no reason not to have a country director for India. I think having the same person in charge of both India and Pakistan was understandably absurd. They were much too big and diverse. So having a separate person in charge of the two of those made sense. On the other hand, you didn't need somebody of equivalent level in charge of Ceylon and what later became Bangladesh and so on.

I think if we'd had a more forthright, I'd say courageous, assistant secretary at that time to make the points, that we could have been saved that reorganization. Ray Hare was then the assistant secretary and although he could be a demon on his staff—and I have great respect for him, don't get me wrong, he gave me an excellent efficiency report, but he was hell to work for in some ways. And he never liked to take issue with his superiors. He was very, very squeamish about that. I think if Ray Hare had stood up and said, "It

makes sense to have a country director for Israel and Pakistan, for Cyprus even. Maybe for Greece and maybe for Turkey, but not for the Arab states and Israel." That he could have held onto that. But he did not make any case.

Q: What was his operating style and his view of the problems of the area?

SYMMES: Basically, he was a man of balance, I thought. In private he could get very irritated about the pressures of the Israelis. But he had known a lot of Jewish people who subsequently became Israelis before they were Israelis, before the partition, back in the '30s. He had known these people and had good relationships with them. He knew a lot of the people in the American Jewish community and had good relations with them and he was respected. As I say, I think he had a good degree of balance. But Ray wasn't a person who was good in the give-and-take of debate. He wasn't a dialectician. Therefore he tended to avoid debate. The result being that he was looked upon as something of a pussyfooter. He didn't want to antagonize. He would keep things as much as possible from the seventh floor.

Q: The seventh floor in this context means . . .

SYMMES: The seventh floor being the Secretary's level.

At the same time, if there was what was obviously going to be a controversial decision that he could not avoid taking a position on, he'd back it up. So I think he was very good in some ways.

He helped a great deal when he was ambassador in Cairo in the period of '57-'58 to get a more reasoned view—this was in the latter days of Dulles when Herter took over, the end of the Eisenhower Administration—of Nasser. He didn't go with his jaw out in front as much as I would have liked to see him go. But he certainly did it more than many of his colleagues.

But coming after Phil Talbot, Ray Hare was not a breath of fresh air, let me tell you. He tended to cow junior officers and keep them off balance . . .

Q: Which meant that this did not allow for a free flow of information and thoughts up through the system.

SYMMES: Let's put it this way. Whereas when Phil Talbot was there, I would have had no hesitancy in calling up Bob Komer or even Mac Bundy in the White House and saying, “Look, thus and so,” without having consulted with him at all, but also without committing the Department. come out with a policy proposal, in other words, sort of run it up the flagpole and see if they would salute it. I wouldn't have dared to do that with Ray Hare.

There were certain times when I did do things and reported conversations that I'd had with an Israeli or something. You know, when you'd sort of put out a trial balloon and note reactions. Sharp raps on the knuckles! He tended to want to treat subordinates very much as junior officers just getting started. This was very unsettling to most of his staff.

Q: What were your principal concerns during this period dealing with the Near East?

SYMMES: Well, one of the principal concerns that we had at that time was an area—which I can't talk very much about because it's still highly classified—having to do with disarmament and with arms control in the Near East.

Q: I'm hoping sometime we can get a solid study of this.

SYMMES: I can tell you in bare outlines what the concerns were. We were concerned that the Israelis were developing a nuclear weapons capability. We knew, of course, that they had a nuclear establishment that had been provided to them by the French, a place called Dimona. We knew that the Egyptians would like to develop a nuclear weapons capability and that they were beginning to get a nuclear research capability.

Q: From Germany, if I recall.

SYMMES: That's right. We knew and it was public knowledge that the Israelis had gone very far, indeed, in medium to long-range missile capability with weapons. We knew also and it was much touted—it was far less dangerous than it was sometimes reported, but it was definitely concrete and they even had them in parades—that the Egyptians had gotten research assistance for missiles from the Germans. Some of whom were Nazis or former Nazis. We were therefore concerned to put the brakes on both of these things. Obviously, we had to do it in a context that made it appear that we were not trying to strengthen or degrade either one from a national security standpoint. We wanted to do it in such a way that we would not reveal to either of them how much we knew about their capabilities or to third parties what the situation might be. So this had to be done in very secretive ways. And it was done and was surprisingly effective how far we got in some cases. I think I might say, without revealing anything classified, that John McCloy was actively involved with this and that he did an extremely good job. As you know, he was later involved in disarmament and arms control at a much wider level. That was one of the major things that I dealt with.

Another thing was the continuing problem of the Jordan waters. Now this was the River Jordan tributary system and the water resources of the Near East which, of course, involved Lebanon, Syria, Jordan and Israel, and how those waters were to be divided up among the parties.

We thought we had it solved at one point in the mid '50s but at that juncture the Arabs, who were supposed to have agreed—Syria principally—pulled out and so there was never a formal agreement. But we agreed to go ahead and help Israel and Jordan with their water projects on the basis of the agreement that was almost formally signed. Those water projects would be based on what had seemed to be an equitable distribution of the waters.

Now at that point and by '64, this erupted into a major dispute, the Syrians with other Arab backing, with Saudi Arabian and Kuwaiti financing, decided they were going to divert the waters from the upper Jordan around the Jordan basin, thus depriving the Israelis of what they had been guaranteed under the so-called Johnston Report—Eric Johnston—to send that water on down to Jordan and part of it to Syria.

The Syrians were up on the Golan Heights, of course now in Israeli hands as the result of the '67 war, firing on Israeli water usages across the border. Well, that was a very interesting problem and I did a lot of work on that, mainly at the supervisory level but going out to the area and visiting all the major sites and talking to all the principals. And trying to come up with some way to defuse the situation. We didn't really get very far with that and ultimately the '67 war came about and part of the cause of it was the waters dispute. Another thing that happened was by 1962, '63, the Israelis were putting a great deal of pressure on us to arm them and also to come out with a mutual security treaty with them, which we had resisted. Again just to oversimplify, we had ultimately, after a great deal of pressure from the Israelis and from the American Jewish community, agreed to sell them tanks which considerably lifted the level of the military confrontation and we did this through the device of using West Germany to sell the American tanks to the Israelis. [Laughter] One of our typical foreign policy boo-boos that we get caught out in.

The tanks were first of all sold and then subsequently up-gunned, an expression that the Pentagon coined at the time. That is, they had a 90 mm replaced with a 105 mm which meant that the Israelis could outgun any tank supplied by the Russians to the Syrians or to the Egyptians, or any tank supplied to the Jordanians by the British.

Well, that was another problem we had. We were constantly under pressure to sell to the Israelis and the Jordanians and the Lebanese increased quantities of military hardware. Most of which we would end up, in effect, giving because we gave them enough aid to pay for it all, or we gave it to them on long-term credit.

I was actively involved particularly in Jordanian arms requests. At the time I got to NE, we had made a decision that the very large amount of outright cash aid which we were giving to the Jordanians should be reduced and that in effect they should be weaned of that kind of economic assistance over a period of years. By about $2 to $4 million a year. Down from about $30 or $40 million. I've forgotten the amounts now. This was outright, direct cash support. At the same time, recognizing that they were going to have their economic situation reduced somewhat, they would not be able to buy military equipment and we should, therefore, for a number of reasons including the standoff with Israel, avoid letting them come up with ambitious military plans and equipment.

We had constant requests from them to supply them with sophisticated military equipment —both tanks and aircraft—with the threat that if we didn't, they would go to the Russians.

By this time another policy problem was making itself felt. The Palestine Liberation Organization, had been created in a new form. It had existed as a PLA earlier. But under this new form under Yasser Arafat, it achieved much more significant proportions.

Just as that was happening at the tail end of 1963, Hussein in one of his moments of frustration, which sort of typified his manic depressive sort of cyclical attitude towards us, decided he was going to recognize the Soviet Union and, in fact, visited Moscow. Although we didn't know it at the time, he even talked about getting a military mission from them.

Those were among the types of policy problems that I dealt with at the more or less supervisory level, because I was the sort of straw boss for the desk officers, the officers in charge, while Rodger dealt with the upper levels and with the other agencies. I would get these things in final form to Rodger to sign if he could sign, or buck them up to the assistant secretary level.Another big problem I should mention was PL 480 for Egypt. Based on a number of papers, in fact many of which I'd written in the late '50s, the Kennedy Administration had adopted a much more realistic policy toward Nasser. We'd begun to supply PL 480 . . .

Q: PL 480 being surplus wheat.

SYMMES: This was surplus wheat and other agricultural products. We were supplying massive quantities and those local currencies that were generated by the sale of these commodities could then be loaned to Egypt for other economic projects. Through this we were trying to develop a relationship with Nasser to show him that we didn't hate him and that we wanted to see him succeed if possible. We had very good contacts with some of his chief advisors. We were trying to let him understand that while we hoped he wouldn't buy more arms from the Soviet Union, we couldn't sell him any arms. We could just help in this economic way. I think those were the major problems that we had.

Q: We're talking about arms sales. To an observer now from the late 1980s, it seems like we have just so overloaded the Middle East with arms. The Soviets, of course, have done their thing. You're talking really about at the initiation of the beginning of this. Where did the pressure come from? Did we see what was happening? I mean, that if you do it for one that you've got to do it for the other. Are we sort of selling both sides a mess of pottage?

SYMMES: I'm certainly glad you raised that, because it's crossed my mind a couple of times. Very strange that in that early '60s period right on through the mid '50s, both we and the British had a policy of selling military equipment in effect to make money. In other words, this was a means of balancing our payments, believe it or not! [Laughter] The British were selling used but also, and primarily, new equipment. So they were looking for markets all over the place. The French similarly. We were primarily selling surplus equipment. As we developed new tanks, we were prepared to sell old ones. When we developed M-48s, we would sell Shermans or Grants or whatever. It was an established policy of the Pentagon and it was a man named Henry Kuss, deputy assistant secretary, who was in charge of getting rid of surplus military equipment. So there was that pressure to make money on it and the military, without any political axes to grind in any particular way, were very desirous of making these sales because when those sales were made then they could pay for updated, newer and sophisticated equipment. So there was that

tremendous pressure. Therefore, when opportunities came up to sell say M-48s or aircraft to Israel, Jordan or Lebanon, these military salesmen from Northrop or the larger military aircraft firms and the tank firms were all over the landscape trying to promote sales. It was almost chaotic. So we had the administration desire, even willingness, to sell surplus equipment and we had the demands from these countries. So there was just a hell of a lot of pressure to make these sales at that time. We in Near Eastern Affairs didn't want to do it for a number of reasons. It was a siphoning off of resources that were needed for economic development for one thing.

Q: Are we speaking in siphoning off from these countries . . .

SYMMES: From their national budgets. From their overall funds. It was also, no matter how you looked at it, fuel for the Arab-Israeli rivalry, because even though the Israelis would tell you, and sometimes did, they didn't care if the Jordanians got some tanks or some aircraft, that it didn't really matter to them because the Jordanians were ineffective and they knew that they weren't going to use it against them and so on, nevertheless, when the sale was made, immediately the American Jewish lobby was in to say, “Jordanians just got so and so and we're hopelessly outgunned,” or blah, blah, blah. So you had the pressure on in public to make a similar larger sale to the Israelis to take up the slack. Even if the Lebanese got some outmoded tanks of some kind, immediately the Israelis would be in to say, “We've got to get so and so, because the balance has been upset.” So we were against military sales for all those reasons.

I'm sorry to say that what with the military salesmen's power in the Pentagon and with the access that the Israeli lobby had to these people, that by and large we were unable to hold the lid on that. At least for the time I was in NE. Now I tried to do it, particularly in the case of Jordan.

For one thing we had expended, proportionately, almost more of our economic aid funds on Jordan than on any other country in the world. In some ways we had made more

of an impact. In other words, there was something we could point to, some economic development achievement we could point to almost as much as anywhere else in the world. There were things that were being done, like the East Ghor Canal Project and various kinds of agricultural projects, building tourist industry by sort of taking care of hotels and archeological sites. That kind of thing. So it was important for us given the nature of the Jordanian economy to keep that going. There was nothing else. They had no other resources.

And if they spent the money as the King was always wont to do on some new military bagatelle, then obviously it wasn't going to go for economic development. We'd taken, as I say, the decision to cut back on their supporting assistance — the outright cash contribution. That decision had been taken before I got to NE.

When the PLO was created and Hussein decided—because we had decided we were going to supply M-48 tanks to Israel and we weren't going to give him something he wanted and we were cutting back on his supporting assistance—to recognize the Soviet Union and to visit the Soviet Union. He was also doing all kinds of other little nasty things at that time. I can recall—and this goes back to my cut your losses polemic—drafting a memorandum to Phil Talbot. I can even recall the title of the memorandum. It was “Some Unthinkable Thoughts — A Jordan without Hussein.” This was right after the publication of Fulbright's book, Some Unthinkable Thoughts. The thrust of this paper was, let us not get too concerned about what Hussein does. Let us not continue to be so married to the Hashemite monarchy, which in many ways was unacceptable to most Jordanians and to all Palestinians, that we break our necks to keep it going when in effect it wasn't what the people wanted. By keeping it going we were obstructing a possible solution to the problem of Palestine and the future of the people in that area. And were in many ways, putting ourselves in opposition to the nationalistic wishes of the people. These were forces not just of Nasser supporters, but these were forces of people who didn't think that the Hashemite monarchy in particular was the way they wanted to go. That there was no possibility for real democracy and for particularly economic and social democracy in that country if the

Hashemite monarchy remained. Yet we had continued to shore it up and even though we had shored it up and had done many, many things—far more than most people know—for the Hashemite monarchy, when the King decided in some little flight of fancy that he was going to throw some egg at us, he'd do it.

So I said in this memorandum, “Why don't we cut our losses? Why don't we stop following this policy?” Which I had opposed, by the way, back in 1957 when Glubb Pasha had been thrown out by Hussein. This whole policy of supporting the Hashemite monarchy to the extent that we were replacing the British in other words. I had opposed it then because I said, “It seems to me we have got to deal with the dynamic political forces of the area. And they are not represented by the Hashemite monarchy. They were not represented by the Hashemite monarchy when it was founded by King Abdullah and they're not represented by it today.”

All the more it seemed to me important to consider cutting our losses—not to say, “We're going to do Hussein down.” Not to say, “We're against monarchies,” or anything like that. But simply to avoid gratuitous support. To avoid support which wasn't really calculated to help our long-run interests. To let events take their natural course, to stop trying to play God in the Middle East and to let the local forces play themselves out.

Well, I sent that up “very eyes only” and it got a hearing. I remember Phil Talbot saying, “Gee, this is just the kind of thing we want to hear. Nothing we can do about this now, but we're certainly going to put this on the back burner and think about it.” As classified papers are apt to, it leaked out and the next thing you know the agency was terribly upset because of their buddy-buddy relationship with Hussein. I might say parenthetically—again remembering that we have unclassified conversation here—that buddy-buddy relationships, that is relationships between an intelligence agency of our government and a head of government or head of state, or a senior political official in another country, are for the most part unwise and dangerous. And they compromise the effective conduct of

policy. This has been, I think, particularly true for Jordan, but also for Morocco, for Iran, for Greece, for Lebanon . . .

Q: I've served both in Greece under the Colonels where we have that relationship and in South Korea. It doesn't work. It's not to our advantage.

SYMMES: It generally doesn't work, it's not to our advantage and it compromises the effective conduct of policy.

So the agency heard about this paper and they barreled over and that was never looked at again. Obviously, we didn't cut our losses, we didn't change our policy and, in fact, despite my endeavors to cut back or even to kill every arms request that came up—for what I thought were very solid reasons—we supplied Jordan more and more rather than less and less.

I might just digress for a moment and say that in that period because of stands that I took about arms requests generally and more specifically about Jordanian requests that I became known as “Mr. No” on those requests. Inevitably, some of my colleagues considered me anti-Hashemite and anti- Jordanian. Particularly in the year I was Director of Near Eastern Affairs (1965), I had to deal with heads of Jordanian military missions and heads of Israeli military missions and, obviously, in the give-and-take of, “Why do you need this?” and, “What are you going to do with that?”, the mere asking of a question which had no satisfactory answer made one appear to be negative. [Laughter] This had, as far as the Israelis that I dealt with were concerned, including Peres — there was no personal rancor at all involved. But I can't say that for the Jordanians.

Q: Talking about the period of '65, '66 or so, what was the role of the Israeli lobby on you or on your operations?

SYMMES: They endeavored to keep in as close contact as possible for several reasons. One, to know what was going on. In other words, what is our real policy toward Nasser.

More specifically, how many tons of PL 480 are we going to sell him this year? Are we going to sell to him? When are we going to announce it? What's going to be the total amount? What conditions are there going to be?Those kinds of questions. In other words, attempting to find out for themselves and, I think, in some cases for the Israeli government, what the specifics of our foreign policy were and specifics of our relationships with the other countries, their requests, and that kind of thing.

Another relationship was to try to influence. In other words, make one see reason. In other words, “Why are you still pro-Nasser? Why can't you see what this man is doing? Why can't you see that we really need a desalinization plant funded by you rather than PL 480 for Nasser?” Those kinds of things. Also some of the contacts were just what we called in the Foreign Service the maintenance of relationships against the day when they might be needed. So as my wife would agree, we were entertained all the time and had to go to any number of different kinds of parties by the American Jewish community as well as the Israeli Embassy.

Q: Did you have anything more to say about the Israeli lobby?

SYMMES: I would just say this. They were very persistent. They were very realistic in terms of putting the pressure on. You could call it forthright or call it . . . they use to call it chutzpah. I found it sometimes irksome in the sense that it took an awful lot of time, but I never found it unpleasant and I never felt that it was something that I shouldn't be doing as part of my job. In other words, it seemed to me that they had a right to have their view expressed and they had a right to know as much as I was able to tell them. Of course, I wasn't always able to tell them what they wanted to know.

Q: Looking at it, you were in a central position. Do you have any comments to make about the representations and the reporting of our embassies in the Middle East? Were they well staffed, were we getting good reports or succumbing to localitis? Were there any problems that you can think of?

SYMMES: For the most part, given the constraints in some of the countries on their access to individuals in the government and the nature of our relations, I thought the reporting was quite good. There were one or two exceptions over the period of my four years in NE when there were individual officers who, I thought, got out of line, lost their objectivity and did not follow up on opportunities they might have had or they might have developed. But for the most part I thought . . .

Q: I'm not trying to malign anyone, but I'd like to get an idea where these areas might have been.

SYMMES: Well, for part of that time our reporting out of Baghdad was not too good. I don't want to name any names, but we had more than one officer doing political reporting in Baghdad who had particular axes to grind and they seemed unable to look at the larger picture. Their reporting, it seemed to me, did not reflect the sensitivity to what was going on in Iraq and how Iraq sometimes related to the rest of the Arab world. Very frequently there would be supererogatory comments about what was happening in another Arab country, or in Israel or in the relationships with Israel which went beyond their ability to understand or to have any real important comment to make. I think that for the most part, however, that the reporting was pretty good. The reporting in Beirut has always been difficult. I think it's because of the nature of Lebanon. You served in Beirut, I think.

Q: No, I served in Saudi Arabia.

SYMMES: Oh, that's right. Beirut was such a conglomerate of peoples and influences and so many wires crossed there, and so many people were trying to do so many things to so many other people, that it was possible to get a very mistaken view about what was going on. At the same time, the idea developed that Beirut was the crossroads of information and, therefore, what you learned in Beirut should be given some weight. For the most part, that was not true.

Q: It was such a pleasant place - for newspaper people too. [Laughter]

SYMMES: That's right. And the newspaper people would frequently be just about as badly informed as the embassy was.

Q: That's what they all learned from each other at the St. George Hotel.

SYMMES: It was obviously much easier to get the word on what was happening in Saudi Arabia from a Saudi or an American who happened to be in Beirut than it was to go down to Saudi Arabia and find out for yourself. [Laughter] And similarly with the other Arab countries, Yemen and Kuwait, Iraq or Syria.

So I thought by and large the reporting from Beirut was not terribly good.

Q: One of the stories that has penetrated the halls of the State Department is that anything that is written from Israel is immediately leaked to congressmen, Friends to Israel or something. In other words, so that there is a tremendous inhibitor on reporting in Israel, reporting it as it is seen. Did you find this was true or an inhibitor, again, at the period you were talking about?

SYMMES: It was not true at that time. We had some very good and, in fact, almost too much political reporting from Israel sometimes. [Laughter] Steve Palmer I have in mind. Do you know Steve? Steve's a very valuable guy. Oh, Steve just deluged us with reports. Most of which were quite good and thoughtful reports. Stackhouse also was a good reporter.

Q: But he supports one key to somebody looking over their shoulder and worried about . . . I mean these were what you'd call straightforward, calling them as they saw them.

SYMMES: I would say in both the case of Steve Palmer and Bill Hamilton, who was the consul general in Jerusalem, and Heywood Stackhouse, that they were always reporters

who called the shots just as they saw them and on controversial matters. They weren't necessarily going down the Israeli line at all.

As you well know, the reports sent in by a political officer and signed by him usually are reviewed by the deputy chief of mission who initials them or something. Not always, sometimes they just go in. But if a deputy chief of mission didn't agree with what was being concluded or thought that it was inappropriate, he could certainly stop it. To the best of my knowledge this was never done in any of the posts when I was in NE. At the same time, and this was the main point I was going to make, the chief of mission in some of the posts had the primary contacts and in effect the significant contacts — the ones that really made a difference. This was certainly true while Wally Barbour was Ambassador in Israel. Wally Barbour alone dealt with Golda Meir or Ben Gurion or Eshkol or whoever happened to be the Prime Minister or the Foreign Minister. That was the nature of the beast. In other words, the really important things that had to do with policies of Israel in this case, were going to be stated by the Prime Minister and the Foreign Minister, and they were stated to the ambassador and not to the junior assistant political officer or even the DCM, unless he happened to be the charg# d'affaires. Wally Barbour had a very special and privileged position with the Israelis. Wally Barbour would be the first to tell you that he thought that the Arabs were some sort of maniacs. And that Arabists were some sort of crazy people who dealt with maniacs. [Laughter] He never hid that and on the other hand he always gave a fair hearing to a position stated by a colleague in an Arab country.

To give you a case in point. In 1968 I was back on consultation. I'd been in Jordan for several months and the Jordanians had several requests for arms resupply. There were some things it seemed to me, much as I was opposed to arms, for which a certain resupply was necessary psychologically and which wouldn't upset the balance, and I had made a big point with Joe Sisco and through him with the White House that we should try to accede to part of those requests. I can recall that William Rogers, who was by then the Secretary of State, had a meeting with us and Wally Barbour, Hermann Eilts from Saudi Arabia, Dwight Porter who was up in Lebanon, and I've forgotten who the other people

were. I can recall when Rogers was asking us all what he could do to help us and I said, “Well, I really need some action on that arms request.”

Joe Sisco and Wally Barbour said, “We can't do it.”

Rogers said, “I think Harry deserves something. I want that done.”

But anyway, it was in that kind of fair spirit that Barbour said, “Okay. I can live with that,” or words to that effect.

To go back to your main question, though, I don't think there was ever any censorship or control on what was reported out of Tel Aviv.

Q: But I take it there is something because this is for people who may not be as familiar as to how the State Department operates. You knew the actors out there and those who were reporting. There were some people reporting whom you had high regard for, and other ones that you had questions about. So one should not take all reports as having the same effect when it came back to Washington. I mean, there were A reports and B reports. And this may have only been in the minds of the officers receiving them.

SYMMES: Exactly. Perhaps that is one of the chief values of an oral history such this. That this kind of statement comes out. That for the most part, what came out of Lebanon—I use to call Lebanon “Graustark”, if you remember the old . . .

Q: That's the romance of Graustark?

SYMMES: Yes. The romance of Graustark. [Laughter]

Q: The Ruritanian type of thing.

SYMMES: The Ruritanian type of thing. [Laughter] Most of the time we didn't give any value to what came out of Lebanon no matter who the ambassador was there. The

ambassadors there generally had a terribly inflated idea of their own importance and what their counsels meant to the State Department. We didn't mislead them, we let them think that. The reports from Lebanon had very little to do with the conduct of policy at that stage. On the other hand, something that would come in from a reflective reporter like Pete Hart, who was an ambassador in Saudi Arabia, certainly John Badeau in Cairo, those people were listened to as were their staffs because we knew that their staffs were in close contact with their chiefs. That if a chief himself had not okayed a report, the deputy chief who knew intimately what his chief thought would have okayed it. So we had a real feel for what we should pay attention to and what we shouldn't.

Q: Well, to move on. You had an assignment—a knowledgeable observer would say this is a peculiar one—going from being at the heart of Near Eastern policy to a position in personnel. Could you describe what it was, how you got that, and how you felt about it?

SYMMES: I leapt at the opportunity, because once the office structure of Near Eastern Affairs had been ruined with the establishment of the country director system I was terribly unhappy. First of all, after having been in charge of all the Arab states and Israel and in effect being demoted to being country director is a big joke — Country Director for Israel and Arab-Israel affairs! I not only found that personally unacceptable, I admit I thought it was an insult. But also, I found that it was impossible to do any effective business because I found myself dealing with former colleagues who had been promoted to country directors or brought in from elsewhere to be country directors and we in effect were competing little fiefdoms, little baronies, in what had formerly been a unified kingdom. I felt there needed to be a Magna Carta or something for the king. [Laughter] So I wanted to get out of that as quickly as possible, and I let it be known to the senior officer assignment division. In fact, I was getting to over three years in Washington and it was then time for me to be looking for an overseas assignment anyway.

My old friend Bob Houghton came up with the opportunity for me to take over what was called the Mid-Career Program, which had established a manpower utilization systems

technique with use of the computer and a lot of other attendant personnel management ideas which I thought were just terrific. So I was attracted to that positively. In other words, I thought it was something that needed to be done and that I would enjoy doing. I'd been doing a lot of personnel work in NE anyway, as I told you earlier. That was one of my jobs.

So when the opportunity came to get that job, I leapt at the chance. And I might say that I narrowly avoided being sent to Vietnam as Counselor for Political Affairs simply because I was one of two or three officers at that level who spoke French. [Laughter] My only qualification.

Q: Martin Herz beat you out.

SYMMES: [Laughter] In any case, at that point this was a critical career . . .

Q: Could you describe concisely what your office was trying to do with mid-career? What was your universe and what you were trying to do?

SYMMES: Right. In this personnel job. I will, but just let me say this though. I came home when I found out about this Vietnam thing, because I disbelieved so much in our policy there, to tell Joan that I was going to refuse to accept the assignment. Luckily, I didn't have to do that. I think any person listening to this tape would be interested to know that there are times like that when you have to make a career decision. It could be tough.

To go back to what happened in the Mid-Career Personnel system. The Mid-Career Personnel system included all Foreign Service Officers except for a few lowly new entrants in what was called a Junior Officer Program and a few very high-ranked officers in what was called a Senior Officer Program. It constituted most of the Foreign Service. It had taken up a new technique called manpower utilization systems technique, which was designed to use the computer to store facts about officers, their previous service, their qualifications and their potential and to use that in order to match officers to assignments

over a period of time, as long a time as possible, until they became senior officers and were beyond the Mid- Career Program.

When I got to the program it had already gotten quite well established and the program had separated the body of mid- career officers into what were called cones, or in other words, functions — political, economic, commercial, consular — and we also had security and certain other miscellaneous functions. The idea was to identify officers' skills to determine what their chief functions might be over the course of their careers and at the same time to make sure that they had the training and the graduated assignments that maximized the use of their skills. We saw to it that they got training and kinds of assignments that were necessary to broaden their ability, to make sure that within those functions they had a variety of assignments that broadened their development and where possible - - this was not always possible and it had to be dealt with very carefully — to have a cross fertilization of functions. In other words, to move people from one cone to another.

Another idea that we had in mind was to make sure that all of the functions were treated equitably. In other words, that it was recognized that there were rewarding careers and significant careers in consular work, in commercial work, in economic work, just as there were in the more glamorous political cone, to see to it that there were ranks available so that officers could receive promotions and thereby remunerations in all of the cones and functions. Those were the kinds of things that we were doing.

I reported directly to the Director General of the Foreign Service, who was also the overall Director of Personnel. The then DG, Director General, was John Steeves. He was immediately under the Deputy Under Secretary for Management, who had been Bill Crockett, who was a very imaginative, capable administrator, but somewhat dangerous because he had a limited knowledge of the Foreign Service in some respects, but by and large a man who had good will and wanted to do the right thing. He was succeeded by rather a drudge, but at the same time crafty administrator, named Idar Rimestad, who was

very noisy and gruff, but who, if you talked back to him in a reasonable way, would listen and would back you up. So that was the way it was run.

The person in my job as Director of Mid-Career also chaired what was called the personnel assignment panel to determine with bureau representatives, the chief functional and area bureaus of the Department, what personnel would go to what positions in those bureaus. This gave the bureaus a chance to ask for people they thought were suitable for the jobs that they had available, to make sure that they had a chance to ask for the more capable and didn't just get shoved off with some less capable people. At the same time to make sure that the central personnel system saw to it that the overall interests of the Foreign Service were kept in mind and that we didn't allow a particular bureau to hold on to people or to grab off people. In other words, that the European bureau, considered the glamour bureau, didn't get all of the best political officers or economic officers and that there was a sharing of the wealth.

So I found that that was one of the most challenging and fulfilling assignments that I had in my whole career. When I learned that I had been nominated to be Ambassador to Jordan it was, as I told you earlier, with some trepidation, because I hated to leave that personnel job when it was just beginning to, it seemed to me, get some teeth in it. We were making it work.

Q: What happened to this so centralized equitable control over personnel? It didn't last very long. I might add just for the record here, this is where our paths crossed. I served under you in dealing with the consular cone.

SYMMES: To tell you the truth, I became so occupied with other things when I left there, Stu, that I can't speak with any authority about what happened afterward. I was succeeded by a man who was the Deputy Chief of Mission in Beirut, who had come out of what we call the administrative cone or function. He had had previous experience in the Near Eastern bureau and he came back to take my job. He apparently was well known to and

liked by Idar Rimestad. After being on the job for a few months, unfortunately, he was killed in an automobile accident. So I cannot tell you what he did in the few months of his . . .

Q: I can just add that very little happened. But at a certain point the idea of a centralized personnel system sort of collapsed. For many people, if they want to put their finger on it, where is the heart of the State Department? Sometimes they better look away from the country bureaus and look at personnel because for the Foreign Service as such, the personnel assignments are far more important than policy. Policy goes on, but personnel affects everything. The right assignment means you get promoted, the wrong assignment means you don't. It may mean hardship for your family. All sorts of things.

SYMMES: It means that if you send the wrong people to a post, they're going to cause problems at the post and morale is going to suffer. There are all kinds of ramifications.

Q: It really is the core of the whole Foreign Service.

SYMMES: It is.

Q: Unlike other places where it's more paper shuffling.

SYMMES: Well, there's no question about that. The kind of Service we had—I hope still have—a competitive Service designed to bring out the best qualities in people to ensure that those who are blessed with the better qualities get to use those qualities and so on — that kind of competitive system can function only if you have a central administrative way of dealing with it.As I say, I know little about what happened after I left there, but when I returned to Washington almost four years later—a little over three years later—it seemed to me that personnel was just a wet paper bag. You punched it and your finger just went in and there was nothing there.

Well, one of the things that happened was this. As I used to call them, those petty barons in the bureaus, the Executive Directors and the personnel officers who represented the bureaus did not like the central system at all. It was a test of one's diplomacy to deal with them, because sometimes you had to rule against what they wanted and they were quite prepared to take it right to the top. They'd take it to the Secretary if necessary. So when you ruled against them, you had to be awfully certain of what you were doing. Thank goodness I never got caught out on this. I was always backed up when there was a controversial decision.

So what I'm saying is — I don't mean to be promoting myself on this — but it took a person who was prepared to make a tough decision and who, when making it, made sure that he was on the right grounds and who could depend upon being backed up to hold that system together. Once that failed, you'd had it, and those petty barons would take over again. [Laughter]

Q: From what you've said, I'm surprised that you were appointed to Jordan. I would have thought if for no other reason than having talked about "Thinking the Unthinkable: Life Without Hussein" and that gets leaked to our intelligence agency which has its contacts in the Hashemite Kingdom that they didn't say, "Don't let this guy get in." How did you ever get this assignment?

SYMMES: That's a good question. Mind you, when the idea was put forward, at least one of my dear friends who was in a position to make his views known, made his views known to higher authority to say, "You shouldn't send Harry there. It's not right for Harry and it's not right for Jordan." He was mainly concerned about its not being right for me because of this reputation for being "Mr. No" that had been developed and because he thought the agency was suspicious of me. I recall that when I was first told by Rodger Davies about this, I told him, "Rodger, I don't know. I think Jordan is a lovely place to be and I would like being in the country with all the archeological advantages, and that kind

of thing. Nevertheless, I don't think the Jordanians are going to like it. And you know my reputation."

And he said, "Nick Katzenbach," Katzenbach then being the deputy secretary, "and I have discussed this and we want you to go because of your reputation. In other words, we want you to go because you have stood up against the Jordanians in the past. In our view you have a balanced view toward Jordanian relations with the United States and you have the kind of integrity we want. We want somebody who isn't just going to lie down and let the Jordanians walk over us."

Q: It was not just you, an Arabist, in your going there, but really, because of the reputation that you'd built?

SYMMES: After the '67 war—I was in personnel when that happened and, of course, I had little to do with it, I didn't volunteer to do anything, I left that with my colleagues who had the responsibility, I didn't even share an opinion about it, I kept myself over in personnel — What was the point I was going to make? Now I've forgotten what I was going to say to you.

Q: Well, the '67 war had gone on . . .

SYMMES: Oh, yes. After the '67 war there was a feeling that Hussein personally and Jordan generally had let the United States down. That Hussein had run to Cairo and kissed Nasser on the nose.

Q: This was when Hussein attacked Israel with the Arab Legion.

SYMMES: With Egypt. Yes. And not only that, Hussein had made an undertaking when we had supplied him with 155-mm artillery at an earlier period with the understanding — the ambassador was to tell him—that those weapons were never to be taken west of the Jordan River. But in the '67 war he had taken them across the Jordan River and he

had used them to shell Tel Aviv. So I can't tell you how much animus there was towards Hussein on the part of the senior policymakers. That Hussein, that little devil, they would call him, had broken faith with us in a sort of typical way. They were very angry with him.

Q: So there was much more bitterness. I'd forgotten all about this.

SYMMES: There was a great deal of bitterness at those upper levels. In effect, they wanted to punish him. This is not generally known, but my predecessor there, Findley Burns, had had some very unpleasant encounters with the Jordanian establishment during the war. Not unpleasant to him personally, but unpleasant by virtue of his observing them in the throes of anguish following what was obviously a series of stupid moves and decisions.

Q: They lost Jerusalem and they lost the West Bank.

SYMMES: Yes. They lost face and they lost everything. And they were weeping and sort of wringing their hands. And he saw them at that time. So all of this was known at the upper levels and Findley—I don't want to put words in Findley's mouth—was glad to get out of Jordan. He felt that his position would have been impossible after that.

So I got there under those conditions. At the time I was named to go Jordan, I didn't appreciate all of this to the same extent I do today for a number of reasons you can imagine. I did know that this feeling of animus existed and that I was going to have a tough row to hoe and that I was expected to maintain my personal integrity. Which I did.

So as you see, in the eyes of many of my friendly colleagues—friendly, I've had some that were not friendly— it was not a good assignment and I was being placed in a difficult situation.

Q: Did you have any instructions when you went out there other than just to maintain relations?

SYMMES: Not really, I think as much as anything else because of the breakdown of the foreign policy system caused by this Country Director business. A Country Director didn't have that much grab of policy. I think Roy Atherton by that time had become deputy secretary, I can't recall. Maybe Rodger was still deputy assistant secretary for that part of the world. Luke Battle was the assistant secretary. Luke was sort of laid back.

Q: This is, of course, the answer I get most of the time. Very few people are sent out with real instructions other than, "Get on with it. You're smart, you know what the situation is." Could you give me here your evaluation of Hussein at that point? We're talking about 1967. How did you see Hussein?

SYMMES: He came to Washington in November 1967 just as I was about to go out. I had been granted agr#ment just at the time he came to Washington. During that visit I was brought into meetings he had with various people, although he had meetings that I wasn't aware of as well. I was in a rather strange position because I had not presented my letters and, therefore, was not officially the ambassador to Jordan. I didn't see him again until the following January because he went off—one of his typical ways of doing things—to Spain and England and God knows where. And just sort of drifted around.

When I got to Jordan in November 1967, I presented my letters to his brother, the Crown Prince Hassan. So, as I say, I didn't see Hussein for some time after that.

The Prime Minister at the time was a great nonentity but a very clever, sly, Reynard the Fox type of person.

Q: Who was he?

SYMMES: It was Talhuni. I found that most of my contacts were with the then foreign minister, Ahmad Tuqan, a very old establishmentarian, and with the Army Chief of Staff, whom I'd known from arms negotiations, 'Amir Khammash. The King finally came back sometime in January 1968 and my first real business with him, after a courtesy call, was

when the Chief of Staff called me up in late January to tell me that a Soviet military mission was about to come to Jordan, with about 12 senior military people, because we had not acted on various Jordanian arms requests. They wanted the 155s replaced, they wanted the tanks replaced, etc., and I don't remember all the details now but we had not acted on their requests. So, therefore, the King had decided to invite the Soviet military mission. As I said, the King had just come back. I spent a long time talking to the Chief of Staff and to the Prime Minister—I had to talk Arabic to the Prime Minister—over in the barracks. They said, “His Majesty is adamant and he doesn't want to discuss it. This is going to happen, etc.” Anyway, after long, long talks with them, I finally got them to agree to discuss my views with the King. They called the King up and the King came over to the headquarters, and we went over the whole business again. And he finally instructed the Prime Minister to kill the request. Now whether all of this was a game or a facade, I'll never know. Maybe they have an oral history in Jordan and somebody will reveal it. [Laughter] At any rate, I had to report that, that we'd quashed this Soviet military mission for the time being.

Q: Did you feel it might be a ploy?

SYMMES: Quite possibly a ploy. I wouldn't say probably. There were other indications —I can't recall at the time—but I think it was possibly a ploy. Let me say this, there were Americans who played with ploys for the King. He had advisors sometimes, not necessarily American governmental people, who would suggest ways of pulling the eagle's feathers. So one always had to be extremely careful in dealing with the Jordanians to know what was a ploy, what was real, what was a facade, a charade, or whatever. That was one of the first encounters I had with the King on business.

Later on—I just might throw this in—in terms of how the Foreign Service people to get to deal with heads of state. After I'd been there for a couple of years or so—I forget how long it was now—the ambassador's driver, who had been with the embassy since the beginning and had driven the various ambassadors before me, said, “You know, you have seen the King many more times than all of your predecessors combined.”

I said, “Oh?”

“Yes. You see the King two or three times a week. Some of them wouldn't see him two or three times a year.”

Whether this was true or not, I don't know. I certainly saw him an awful lot. At the same time, other people were seeing him. You know who I mean. When I saw him, it was generally in a situation where either I was talking about something like the Jarring mission. Jarring was the Scandinavian who had been appointed by the UN to pick up the pieces of the '67 war under UN resolution 242.

Q: Gunnar Jarring, or something like that?

SYMMES: I've forgotten his name. Jarring would have no contact with American or British or any other diplomatic representatives. He would deal only with the heads of state or heads of government concerned. So in order for us to know what Jarring and they were discussing, we had to depend on those local people. These were contacts that were very closely held.

When I reported on what the Jordanians told me about their contacts with Jarring, the only people who had access to my report would be my colleagues Don Bergus in Cairo and Wally Barbour in Israel and, of course, the Department. We didn't tell Beirut or Damascus or Jeddah about this.

So I had to see the King about the Jarring mission because he frequently saw Jarring himself, and if I didn't see the King, I saw the Prime Minister. Now, aside from that, I would see the King about arms requests or about economic aid requests. Generally, the arms requests were ones that I'd have to discuss. Obviously, I didn't on my own authority say yea or nay. I would report and then have to come back. Of course, I'd make my own recommendations.

The King had the problem of the Fedayeen who were terrorists, but had not become as terroristic as they later became. He was being quite ambivalent about dealing with them. In effect, by the time I left Jordan, he had lost control of the situation by his rather feckless behavior with them. One day he'd be very hard on them, the next day he'd let them do whatever they wanted, and the result was they were off-balance and he was off-balance, the government was off-balance, we were off-balance. Nobody knew what he was really doing with the Fedayeen. So I would have discussions with him about that.

Another big item on our agenda would happen sometimes in the middle of the night. I would get a telephone call and they would say, “His Majesty wants to talk you.” I could hear the artillery in the distance, even with my bad hearing. And, of course, what would be happening was that the Jordanians and Israelis were having an artillery fire fight on the border, because some Fedayeen had infiltrated and, in effect, the Jordanians were giving them cover and the Israelis were firing back counter battery fire. So the King would get on, “I'm going to have to unleash my artillery if the Israelis don't stop this.” Fortunately, I was able to communicate on line with Tel Aviv. Wally Barbour didn't bother to get up for this kind of thing, but I would talk to the military attach#, the DCM, or somebody on the teletype.

Q: So you were active as sort of an in-between there.

SYMMES: Right. And, of course, the attach# or the people in the embassy in Tel Aviv would get hold of the Israeli authorities, and the Israelis would say, “We'd be glad to stop firing if the Jordanians would just stop letting the Fedayeen come across.” So the King and I would have this kind of discussion by telephone in the middle of the night. Anyway, those were the kinds of contacts I had.

Q: Harry, I'm getting a picture here of King Hussein being a very clever maneuverer but not a survivor, maybe not somebody who's as much in control of things as often as one gets a picture of from the outside.

SYMMES: I think you put your finger on his personality. I frequently have said to people that he was clever rather than wise. I think a number of decisions he made over the years. What he did with Glubb Pasha, the way he handled Glubb's dismissal. The way he handled my so-called transfer. Those various threats that he made about, “I'm going to the Soviets.” His running to Nasser and kissing him on the nose just before the '67 war, and then entering the war. Reckless behavior. The thing he had going for him was a relationship with outside countries that saved him from his mistakes. We are partially responsible for that, and, of course, the British were. But there were many times when Hussein has dug his own grave only to be pulled from it by his friends before he got himself covered up. [Laughter]

Q: Before going into the relationship of the Fedayeen, I guess they're called the Palestinians today. How did you find your staff? This was your embassy and how well was it staffed?

SYMMES: When I was assigned there, I knew the incumbent Deputy Chief of Mission — I don't want to name any names—but the Deputy Chief of Mission had been my predecessor in Kuwait and he had served with me when I was in NE. He had had a very bad alcohol problem which he had licked. Although he had licked the alcohol problem, he had not licked certain other ways of operating. He was a poor administrator and found it hard to pull things together and so on. So when I found that I was going to Jordan, I said to Rodger Davies, “Well you know from the fact that you reviewed the efficiency report I wrote on him that I don't think the Deputy Chief of Mission is a person I want as my deputy. And I would hope that since I am going to a very difficult job that you'll let me have another Deputy Chief of Mission.” Rodger had always found it very difficult to make tough personnel decisions. It was one reason why he had me doing personnel in NE.

He said, “Harry, you're going out new, and you've got to have some period of transition and so on, but I can understand how you feel. We'll certainly want to do it as quickly as

possible, but give it three months or so before we make the change. We'll be looking for somebody."

Well, it was almost a year before they made the change. That DCM and I got on all right, but I didn't have the kind of support that I would have wanted right from the beginning.

Now in terms of the rest of the staff, I was very fortunate. I had Dick Murphy, a wonderful Arabist. Later on Bob Pelletreau joined him. He also spoke Arabic. We had Slater Blackiston, an economic officer who spoke Arabic. The DCM spoke some Arabic. We had a consular officer Dave Zweifel — he later became a chief of mission in the Arab world — who spoke good Arabic. We also had a commercial officer who spoke Arabic.

I could invite in all non-English speaking Arab officials with a sprinkling of American officers and have an entire luncheon or dinner conversation in Arabic. This was very important to me. I felt we were in touch with various aspects of the society and population and government. My subordinates were, for the most part, very good, astute officers. Since we had a buddy-buddy relationship there, I felt that what intelligence we got in was not always dependable and I needed other sources.

Q: This is usually the problem. It's not that you get good intelligence but you become part of the system.

SYMMES: You get what they want to give. That's right. And you're stopped from conducting your own operations. So I had to depend upon my regular staff — these Arabic speakers — to pick up a lot of stuff about what was going on and what people really thought.

Q: I have found this in my experience in other incarnations. Too close relations with the CIA really don't serve you that well because it does mean that you can't then go out and have your independent relations with what amounts to the opposition.

SYMMES: Too big a risk. You compromise your buddy- buddy relationships.

Q: So it hurts more than it helps from a very practical point of view.

SYMMES: I think so. And the other thing is that it's a real undercutting of the chief of mission's authority. No sooner had I gotten out there than Arthur Goldberg, who was then our Ambassador to the UN, had sent out a back channel message asking a certain person what he really thought about the situation. He'd been reading my reports, but what did this other person think? [Laughter] And this other person who knew me already and knew that I was a tough guy when it came to “By God, don't do anything behind my back,” came in and said, “I've got this message, what do I do? I'm in an embarrassing position.” I said,”Just tell him you read everything the ambassador sends in and that you are in agreement with his analysis. That's what you tell him. And if you're not in agreement with me, tell me.”

The same thing with Joe Sisco. He would do the same thing, send back channel messages on me. I think that this is something it really behooves our national security apparatus to look at. Now there are times when we have to have it, and when we do have to have it, we've just got to make certain that we set up ways to prevent it from hamstringing us.

Q: There's another factor. Again, I noticed this in Greece. I'd like you to comment on this. There is a tendency that if something comes in from an overt source and something comes in from a covert source, that you feel that so much effort has gone into getting the covert business that somehow it has greater weight than the fact that your consular officer has been talking to a number of people and finds out that people are unhappy. But if your covert source says “Oh, no, the people are really very happy,” the tendency is to believe the covert rather than the overt. Did you find this?

SYMMES: No question about it. I think one of the practical benefits of serving in intelligence research is that you become so acquainted with the whole business of intelligence that you know that 95% to 99% of “intelligence” is really from overt sources. And that it's really a matter of broad coverage and quality coverage that enables you to make a proper judgment. And that so-called human intelligence of a covert nature just cannot be all that critical. Now in certain circumstances, a police state type of thing, for example, you have to make allowances. But by and large . . .

Q: You mentioned Joe Sisco going back-channel. How did you find him as an operator in this field? Was there a tendency to use straight line or to go kind of around?

SYMMES: I found that—I hope I'm not making too harsh a judgment—Joe was always in it for Joe. That as long as his relationship with you served his purpose of building himself up, he was really for you. You know he had a doctoral degree and he was not an uneducated person, but his knowledge of many aspects of was terribly superficial. He was very adept at the use of words and he was a very good dialectician so that he could smother people and overpower them. He also had a very strong personality and again would tend to overpower people. The only way I found to deal with him was from a position of not letting him put you down or talk you down and give him facts that he would have to listen to. I mean, you could show him that he was wrong. If you didn't stand up to him, like Bill Macomber he would walk all over you. You had to stand up to him. He was always intent on courting his superiors, but he would do anything in the world to avoid having to come into a controversial situation with a superior. I saw this on any number of occasions in meetings with the Secretary after I was in H (Congressional Relations) and later Deputy Inspector General and had to go to the Secretary's staff meetings. It was sort of a joke. Joe would say, “Well, how do you want it?” I mean, “What do you want me to say, I'll tell you.” [Laughter] He was also a very backbiting person and would go around people's backs with impunity. He didn't care.

Q: And you felt this. His position was what?

SYMMES: He was Assistant Secretary NEA. He was first Assistant Secretary IO and then he became Assistant Secretary NEA, replacing either Luke Battle or Pete Hart, I've forgotten which it was, when Nixon came in.

Q: This was sort of a given when you were having to deal with your relations there. Well, you just knew the problem and you had to deal with it.

SYMMES: Yes. Let's put it this way, I'd had very good relations with Joe (he had wanted me as his deputy in IO when I was named to Jordan), and even when he was Assistant Secretary NEA he came out with George Ball on a visit and he took me aside and said, “I'm trying to get Doug MacArthur out of Tehran, and I want you in Tehran.

I said, “I don't want to go to Tehran. I want to go to Cairo or Athens or Tunis. Or maybe Beirut or maybe Tel Aviv.”

“Okay. You stay in touch with me and tell me what you want. You'll get what you want. Just hang on here for a while longer.”

So we'd had a good relationship up until Hussein requested my transfer and then Joe dropped me like a hot potato.

Q: I think we've mentioned pretty much what your major issues were. Anything else before we come to the riots and everything else. They're all intertwined, aren't they?

SYMMES: Yes.

Q: But anything else?

SYMMES: When we got there the Fedayeen had decided that they were really going to try it on. They were collecting money from people. They'd stop you on the street and ask for

money, they'd stop your car and ask for money. They were walking around with Tommy-guns and predecessors of AK-47s and later with AK-47s and camouflage suits and so on. And making a general nuisance of themselves, firing feu-de-joie up in the air. We'd find spent bullets in the embassy residence garden lying on the pavement. You could just pick them up.

There were a number of instances when they had fire fights with the Jordanian military or the police. There were some plots against my life, and once I had to send my family away to Beirut on orders. These things didn't ever amount to anything. What had happened was that I was in the Who's Who in the CIA, that East German publication, because . . .

Q: I'm sure that they're all in INR.

SYMMES: If you were in the INR, you got in it. One thing about the communists is that they are literal minded and you get that kind of thing in their computer and brother, you're stamped for the rest of your life. And then I spoke Arabic. So the Soviets were putting a lot of bad stuff out in broadcasts and various other media outlets in the Middle East about me. By and large, this was a time I felt it was rather hazardous for my family in particular. I wouldn't say it didn't bother me, but it didn't bother me personally very much. But it was a bad time for my family and it was a bad time for the whole staff, particularly the people on the AID staff. We had a large AID staff in Jordan who were very nervous about what was happening. They couldn't sometimes understand the situation or the animus towards us or why we couldn't be nicer to the Palestinians or why we were so pro-Israeli and that kind of thing. I tried to brief the Country Team frequently on our policies in a general way.

Many parts of the country had become off-limits to us because they were Fedayeen territory where the King's writ no longer ran. We couldn't go to some very desirable places to visit. So by mid-summer of 1969, the situation had become so tenuous that the King couldn't decide whether he was going to put the Fedayeen down or whether he was going to give them some degree of freedom, whether he was going to use the police to put them

down or whether he was going to use the military to put them down. He wanted to use the military because he saw that as a means of getting M16 rifles for the military from us. There were all kinds of factors like that involved. We were just getting nowhere in what he was going to do about the Fedayeen.The Jarring mission also seemed to be collapsing. The War of Attrition had begun between Egypt and Israel, and the King had put in a request for Skyhawks—F-4s. Obviously, I wasn't about to endorse that. I didn't tell him but I'm sure word leaked out to him by you can imagine how. And also word leaked out from other American missions, and I had colleagues on my staff who leaked out information that I was opposed to Skyhawks for Jordan—or hadn't endorsed their request. The Department wasn't about to endorse it anyway. [Laughter]

By early 1970 we were really in something of a quagmire, and about that time it was thought it would be a good time for Joe Sisco to make a visit to the area, that he would go to Cairo and Tel Aviv and ultimately Jordan. He was to come to Jordan from Tel Aviv. Well, he got to Tel Aviv, and at that point apparently the King decided—now whether this was a ploy, whether he had something to do with it, whether some of his staff had something to do with it, or how it came about—he let the Fedayeen demonstrate. And in letting them demonstrate against Sisco's visit, he withdrew protection from around the embassy, from the cultural center and certain other locations in Amman in order, as they said at the time, to avoid inciting the Fedayeen.

So one morning in April 1970 I went as usual to the embassy. (My route was always varied. Sisco was over in Tel Aviv, and there had been a mounting press campaign and radio campaign about “We don't want Sisco,” blah, blah, blah. And I was in close touch with Joe, of course, over in Tel Aviv. When I arrived at the embassy that morning, there were no troops about. No armored cars, no Bedouin guards. And a surging mass of people in combat fatigues and one thing or another were fanned out around the embassy. I managed to get into the embassy, and the next thing I knew—there were a few soldiers

around—an Army captain came in and was brought up to my second-floor office to see me. He said, “The Fedayeen have requested that you lower the American flag.”

And I replied, “I'm not going to lower the American flag. This is a diplomatic mission. Why are the armored cars and the protection not here?”

“We didn't want to have them here in order to avoid inciting the mob.”

“Well, I think you'd better do something about the mob.”

By this time they were throwing stones and bottles at the buildings, and we had all the shutters down. We were prepared of course for mob violence, and we had rigged up a device so that halyards of the flag were sort of halfway up the pole and they could be pulled over to an upstairs window so you couldn't just pull the flag down. Well, one of those ninnies shimmied up the flag pole and got the halyard and pulled the flag down. [Laughter] And then they started tearing it up. And, as I said at the time, it was like dividing up pieces of the true cross. You could buy a piece of the American flag down in the souk. It had been liberated that day. The mob were breaking windows and by this time they had set some embassy cars on fire. The embassy nurse narrowly escaped from her little building out in the garden. The mob uprooted all of the roses in the garden, pulled up plants, etc.Meanwhile, of course, I was trying to get through to the Foreign Minister, the Prime Minister, the King. Nobody could be found. They were all at a parade at the Army General Headquarters. So I did all the proper things to get messages to them as quickly as possible.I looked across to one of the other hills where the cultural center was located. It was up in smoke! I got a telephone call that the mob had gotten into the cultural center and they were burning the books. They had such a fire that the iron shelving melted. So the cultural center was just completely demolished. Finally, I got through to somebody in authority, and I said, “Look, you've got to get the military or the police or somebody out. Lord knows how much longer the embassy is going to be able to hold out.” Ultimately, they did get the mob dispersed. They brought in some troops and so on.

That afternoon I was able finally to get through to someone to get an appointment with the King and went out to his residential palace. He was there with Zaid Al-Rifai, Chief of the Royal Diwan, who was later Prime Minister — one of his nefarious advisors—very refined. I, of course, told the King that I was very concerned about what had happened, that I hoped he had a full report about it and that there would be restitution of what had been destroyed in terms of physical property. He never said he was sorry. His sidekick never said he was sorry. I said, “I think in view of what's happened, we are going to have to consider some way maybe to postpone the Sisco visit.”

He said, “Oh, no. That would certainly not be possible. You mustn't postpone that visit whatever happens. I am in charge here and I can assure you that Mr. Sisco will be safe.”

“Well, the plan calls for him to cross the Jordan River and then to be motored up to Amman, which would provide very tricky places for an ambush.”

“Oh, no. I'll have my helicopter pick him up and fly him to Amman.”

“Well, the Fedayeen have got all kinds of assault rifles and hand missiles, and I don't think that would be particularly safe.”

“As long as I'm in control of this country, Mr. Sisco will be safe. He must come.”

I then reminded him of December 1958 when I'd gone out with Bill Rountree on a trip around the Middle East. We'd ended up in Baghdad and been attacked by a mob and so on. Before we'd gone on to Baghdad, we had visited both Hussein and Nasser, who had warned us not to go, that if we went we were going into a trap and so on. Bill and I went, anyway. Although we had recommended we not continue the trip to Baghdad, Loy Henderson who was in charge at the time—Dulles was sick and Herter wasn't there—said we had to go and we went and almost lost our lives.

So I reminded the King of this and said, “You know, we didn't take your advice then, and Bill Rountree wished we had when we got there. Maybe this is one of those times, Your Majesty, that we should think about a way to avoid having Sisco come. We could come up with a very good public relations rationale. We could get him sick. There are all kinds of things we can do and just postpone the visit.”

He said, “I shall regard Sisco's not coming as a deliberate personal insult and I shall consider you responsible.”

So I went back to the embassy with that and communicated all this to Joe and to Washington and made a recommendation that Joe not come in the circumstances. Because I didn't think the King was effectively in charge of the situation and even if he tried to be in charge that he would succeed. Given what the mob had just done, we did not know what would happen if he came. I thought Joe's life would be in danger, and not only Joe's life, but the whole American community would be in danger. It was just too easy to cut our losses, in other words. So I sent word back to the Department — Joe concurred in it, Wally Barbour concurred in it — and the Department agreed that I should say Mr. Sisco had unavoidably been forced to postpone his visit and would not be coming. An illness or something like that—I've forgotten now the rationale. Perfectly good one. I was told to communicate that to the King the next day. So I had that message and written out and called up the palace and spoke to Zaid Al-Rifai, Chief of the Royal Diwan. He said, “His Majesty is not available and he has asked me to take any message that you may have. What can I do for you?”

I said, “Well, this is for His Majesty's ears only and I'd really like to see him. I think it is terribly important for our two countries.”

“His Majesty is just not going to be available to do it.”

Well we hemmed and hawed and he said, “Bring it to me.”

I said, “Well, I'd like for you to go back to the King and see what can be done.”He called up later and said the King wasn't going to be available. So I sent the message over by Morris Draper. I told Morris not to say anything. Now whether Morris followed my instructions or not, I don't know. I didn't always rely on him and his judgment. In any case, that was in the very late afternoon. About 9:00 that evening, I was watching a home movie with my family and I got a call from the Prime Minister to come and see him. He said the King had requested my transfer to Washington. He said that he had advised against it. I said, “Well, I hope you can go back to him. I think its a very bad idea. I don't think its going to be good for our relations on either side. Apart from any personal effect on me, I just don't think it's going to look good for Jordan. I'm due for a transfer anyway. I've just been waiting for orders, why not let the thing go through?”

He said, “Well, we'll keep it quiet so you just get word to Washington.”

Of course, the next day it was all over the papers. [Laughter]

That's a typical sort of Hussein way of acting.

Q: So really more a personal pique and really wasn't manipulating, this doesn't have the . . .

SYMMES: Childish.

Q: There's a childish element there.

SYMMES: Yes. “I'm going to pick up my marbles and go home.” I recall I had to leave the day after that to go to an ambassadorial conference in Tehran. Joe was going as well, and that was one reason he had come out on the trip at that time. I flew up to Beirut to pick up the plane to go to Tehran and recall that Dana Adams Schmidt was on the airplane. I've forgotten whether it was on the Amman-Beirut or the Beirut-Tehran leg, but he was sitting beside me.

Q: He's a New York Times reporter.

SYMMES: A New York Times correspondent at the time and a long-time middle eastern reporter. He said, “Harry, don't feel bad about that. He does this to all the people he really likes and respects. Look at what he did to Glubb Pasha.” Laughter]

I said, “That's not much solace at this time.”

Q: What did this do to you when you came back to Washington?

SYMMES: Well, when I came back I was assured that I would be taken care of, so to speak. Joe Sisco said, “You saved my life,” and blah, blah, blah. On the other hand, I found that when I got to Tehran, to the ambassadorial conference, that nobody appeared to listen to anything I said in the discussions. [Laughter]

In any case, I got back to Washington very shortly after that. I left within three weeks after this happened. My wife stayed on and narrowly escaped being caught in the Fedayeen disturbances there in May. She happened to be in Beirut with my son, so they weren't molested or hurt in any way.

Q: This was the Black September . . .

SYMMES: This was the May revolt—well, they even raped a couple of American women and so on. I was back on the Washington end as the crisis center coordinator for that. When I got back, they said, “We would like for you to consider going to Dakar, exchanging places with Dean Brown,” who did, in fact, succeed me in Amman. “Or Sofia, Bulgaria, is going to be open. Or there is H, Deputy Assistant Secretary Congressional Relations. Those are the things we have and we can talk about some other things. Meanwhile, get yourself some leave.”

Then I got involved in the crisis center and I talked the options over with Joan by mail and telegram, and we felt that— we had one child remaining at home then, the other two were in college—our little boy had really been through an awful lot of physical insecurity in Amman and it was time for us to give him a measure of peace and stability at home. And we wanted to be near our other older children in college. Moreover, I had no knowledge of West Africa and really no desire to go there. I had no knowledge of Sofia even if they had ultimately given it me. So I opted to go into Congressional Relations, again, with a positive view that it was important to have Foreign Service people try to improve relationships with Congress. That turned out to be a fiasco. It was the time of the Nixon White House and Kissinger and Haig, John Lehman, all trying to deceive the Congress in any way they could.

I quickly found out that I was in the wrong spot and ultimately was able to get myself another job as Deputy Inspector General, which was a good job. I found out as soon as I got back that no one in Middle Eastern Affairs could care less about what I thought about what was going on anywhere out there. I was not surprised by that. I found out that no one seemed to think that there was a post in the Middle East that I could be assigned to without the Hussein dismissal in effect coming into play. And I found out that there were some people who were even possibly putting it out—and I have one person in mind particularly about this—that my transfer from Jordan had been brought about by my own lack of diplomatic skill in dealing with Hussein and so on.

Q: There is an intolerance if things don't go well within the Foreign Service. I find there is this sort of "Well, so and so brought it on themselves," including being kidnapped and taken as a hostage. [Laughter]

SYMMES: [Laughter] Yes—shouldn't have been there.

Q: This is a major problem if something of this nature happens. Again, the hostage situation is a particular case in point. Or if you're persona non grata which is done by the whim of someone.

SYMMES: It's like our policy that we don't deal with terrorists. We certainly should have a policy of when a person has been declared persona non grata, unless he really has done something egregiously bad, we should support him to instill morale within the rest of the Foreign Service. But that's not the way it happens and, in fact, Joe Sisco dropped me like a hot potato. I found no one at a higher level who was interested in getting me a good job. Bill Macomber, with whom I'd had poor relations ever since I'd known him, was Deputy Under Secretary of Administration. He'd also once been ambassador to Jordan. It was quite clear that as long as he was Deputy Under Secretary of Administration, there was little chance of my getting a good post.

The handwriting was on the wall. I didn't want to face that when I first came back, and it wasn't all that clear for another year or so. But by the time I'd been back a year, I could see that Sisco wasn't going to do anything to get me a good post overseas. Rodger Davies was unable to — he didn't have the power to do anything. Roy Atherton apparently didn't have the power or the inclination to do anything and, as I said, Macomber wasn't going to let anything happen. The Deputy Secretary, whose name I can't remember, I found out later was told by people in the White House that I was a liberal and should be watched.

Q: This was the height of the Nixon White House.

SYMMES: That's right. And therefore he had to be careful in my dealing with the Congress. So that was that. I just found out — and it took me a long time to face up to it — that my career, in effect, was over. I enjoyed being Deputy Inspector General. I thought it was a good job. We had a chance there to do something—it got muffed, as usual. It was a brilliant concept but it got muffed and Bill Macomber effectively did it in.

Q: My impression toward the latter years of the Foreign Service was the Inspection Corps had lost its importance. I mean, there were some nice people who came around but it no longer was of any pertinence.

SYMMES: That's right. Well, it had that brief chance when it was going to be called the Management Evaluation Group. It had a brief chance really to do something about policy evaluation. And we did that for about a year or so but then Tom McElhiney and I left and it floundered. It became the old inspection corps again.When I first came back from overseas, I had thought about going back to the academic life for a long time. I looked around but there weren't any good jobs. It turned out that by '74 an old friend, who was on a board of a college in Vermont, said they wanted a president to save the college, and would I like the job. So I went up and looked around, decided I would like to try to save the college, but didn't succeed.

Q: What you pointed to on this is that something, as least I felt, in the Foreign Service—like your comment—we're a band of brothers, now a band of brothers and sisters, often sharing very difficult times in very difficult places. You have some of your best friends there. But it's not a very supportive or cohesive group once you get out of the loop. It's not that it's a backstabbing organization, but it looks on towards other things. Maybe the people are overly self-centered or their eyes are on the job, but I don't find it a real brother/sisterhood in this way, in good times and bad.

SYMMES: Well, I think that's right. Although there have been times when I felt that it was more fraternal and so on than it has been in others. Take for example, how we utilize the resource of people who had preceded us in various jobs. I've never been called on since I left the Department about anything in my experience or what opinion I had. “What do you think about this or anything else?” [Laughter] In fact, I think that when my comments have been volunteered they've probably been resented, like a letter I wrote to Secretary Shultz about our policy in Lebanon.

Now, when I was in NE we developed a consultant system whereby we brought in people, former ambassadors, people from the academic world, to look at various kinds of speculative policy problems, papers that we had developed. We had Nadav Safran, an Israeli who was on the Harvard faculty, John Badeau, various people like that who had retired and so on. We'd bring them in to talk about policy problems and to look at papers. If we didn't like what they said, we didn't take the advice, but we at least tried to get it and sometimes it was good. You don't find that going on much.

Q: This is why this oral history program is being done by a private institution with little hope that many people within the active-duty Foreign Service will read it. I think it's a career or professional weakness.

SYMMES: I couldn't agree more. You're condemned to repeat the mistakes if you don't profit from the history of them. And you don't know the history unless you ask about it.

Q: Harry, this brings it to an end. I hope I haven't tied you up too much.

SYMMES: No, no. It's been a pleasure.

Q: It's a fascinating slice of an important career and an important time.

SYMMES: If there's space left, let me just add that there's one message I want to pass on to researchers, historians, people who are thinking about coming to the Foreign Service or who are looking at the way it goes. That is this business I've referred to several times of learning how to cut our policy losses. We've got to develop an ability in our society and our culture to look at ourselves and to review what we've done to make sure that it's the right thing to continue doing. And when it isn't, to find ways graciously and effectively to change our policies and our behavior. As I said, any number of times I've seen it happen in our diplomacy. We've just sent good money after bad and have been unrealistic about what was taking place and whether or not we could change it.

Q: Vietnam being the worst example or the best example.

End of interview